

OVERLORD 14

The Witch of the Falling Kingdom

Kugane Maruyama

Illustration by so-bin





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Volume 14: The Witch of the Falling Kingdom

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Prologue

Prologue

Ainz's room was situated on the Ninth Floor of the Great Underground Tomb of Nazarick. The room, which had been converted from a bedroom to an office, was positioned closest to the corridor. Inside, its owner was nowhere to be found yet the faint sound of paper being shuffled could be heard. Next to the desk frequently used by Ainz sat a smaller yet equally exceptional table and chair. It is upon such a chair that Albedo, the Guardian Overseer of the Great Underground Tomb of Nazarick, was perched to process the documents laid on the desk.

Ainz had already prepared a separate office specifically for her, one that was equal in status to his room, a room reserved for prospective guild members. At first, she had indeed been using that room as her own for clerical purposes, yet the day still came when she could no longer suppress her desire to work in the same room as her master. Although her requests were not met with any positive responses at first, her sincere pleas on the practical advantages of her proposal, in combination with a relentless barrage of complaints, had managed to receive approval from her master.

Staring at the vacant seat, Albedo lowered her head and pouted slightly. The maid assigned to Ainz's room for the day (not the one assigned to accompany him) was standing silently behind her. Due to that, Albedo's rare expression went completely unseen. Her one and only master was currently out tending to his duties and so was absent from the Great Underground Tomb of Nazarick. He was taking care of routine business in the city of E-Rantel.

If she had her master's permission, she would have severely punished the idiots who, by setting up a meeting, had dared to encroach on the time she should be spending with him.

Of course, she knew that such a request would never be approved. As such, she forcefully suppressed her pipedream to turn E-Rantel into a sea of flames,

but her efforts were in vain. The dissatisfaction in her heart grew until it boiled over and managed to manifest as complaints.

"How annoying... those insects..."

Labored breaths filled with terror could be heard from the ceiling, yet they were intentionally ignored by Albedo. She still hadn't forgotten the time they had ruined her chance and felt certain that they deserved to be scared at least a couple of times more. On the other hand, she had already forgiven Mare for his part in the incident[1] for some reason. To regulate her emotions, Albedo sighed heavily. She gently twisted her shoulders a couple of times before turning to look at the remaining documents.

Following Nazarick's — no, the Sorcerer Kingdom's accelerated expansion, her workload had increased proportionally.

Regarding Diplomacy:

Behind the curtains of the cordial interactions they've had with multiple other countries, the horns signaling the start of an espionage war had already been sounded.

Although they had confirmed the presence of spies from the Theocracy, the Kingdom, and the City State Alliance in E-Rantel, the Sorcerer Kingdom chose to simply observe their actions for now. As Demiurge was managing those affairs, all Albedo had to do was to memorize the reports in front of her.

Regarding Internal Affairs:

E-Rantel hadn't experienced many incidents caused by racial tensions. It wasn't as though there were none to speak of but, compared to other countries, their numbers were shockingly low.

The citizens weren't technically being threatened into this state either. They just had a clear understanding of exactly how terrifying the Sorcerer King and his undead subordinates could be, to the point where they'd choose to keep to themselves and live out peaceful lives by their own free will.

The crime rate was thus minimal. Although misdemeanors had occurred, none dared to commit a felony. E-Rantel had become a haven where women and children could walk the streets at night without worrying about their own safety. It had come to the point where they had run out of criminals to experiment on and had to import them from the Empire.

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1. Refers to Albedo's attempted sexual assault of Ainz. See Light Novel *Volume 8: The Two Leaders,* "Side Story 2: A Day in Nazarick."

A crime that occurs in such a peaceful city is then a matter of utmost importance to Albedo. According to Heinrich's law, a major accident indicates the presence of 29 minor accidents which in turn could indicate over 300 anomalies. What needs to be done then is to respond to any and all oddities, no matter how small they may be.

The binder in her hand held a month's worth of court records from E-Rantel.

Due to how detailed the reports were, reading even a single one of them would be a massive time commitment. However, Albedo could process these documents much faster than a regular person, giving onlookers the false impression that she's just flipping through them without giving them much thought at all.

In conjunction, the pen that was held in her other hand moved at a blistering pace, noting down information she found interesting onto a white sheet of paper.

Was the judge's ruling appropriate? Why would the defendant commit such a crime? Surmise from the above the current state of public order and morale in E-Rantel. Is the creation of new laws in response to the above necessary?

What would normally require an intense scrutiny of records by officials gathered from every corner of a nation, Albedo was doing on her own: analyze, evaluate, process. To do this, one would require an intimate understanding of internal affairs on par with one's familiarity with the backs of their hands as well as an inhuman level of lucidity.

Her pen stopped moving as soon as she finished reading the report and the process to transcribe the key words she had noted down began. After all it was something her master was about to read, illegible handwriting would be absolutely unacceptable. After spending more time transcribing the most important details, proposals, and other such documents than she had spent reading, it was finally ready.

Skimming over the completed documents from top to bottom, Albedo's lips formed the tiniest sliver of a smile. This wasn't for the fact that she had just completed another task but was simply borne from the gratification she experienced knowing that she was proving herself to be useful to her master. She placed the documents back into the binder and gently raised it into the air where it was received by the maid on standby, who subsequently placed it onto her master's desk.

This was the fifth binder she's had to go through today. A slightly concerned

expression could be seen on her face, her current situation was not great to say the least.

The Sorcerer Kingdom had through both direct and indirect means greatly expanded its territory, causing them no end of troubles. Compared to before, the number of documents that must be brought to her master's attention had greatly increased. A leader being forced to sift through mountains of documents would imply flaws in the organization.

As originally intended, her superior would only have to dictate a general direction or goal for his subordinates to work towards. All he should have to do is to sit back on his throne and observe the hard work of his creations.

The fact that reality did not match expectations was not her master's fault. Those that could match his expectations were few and far between, in other words, they lacked sufficient talent. As the one appointed to manage the internal affairs and human resources of Nazarick, Albedo couldn't help but feel ashamed of herself. Though she had taken precautionary measures, the future remained uncertain.

To bother my master over such trivialities would be absolutely ridiculous, but... racial unity policies, plans to trial national laws, economic policies, and more must be determined by my master... if I do all the progress checks on tasks assigned to the Floor Guardians, it would displease everybody because they won't be able to see Momonga-sama, right...?

For the moment, her master had given her free reign over all his affairs, no matter how important or insignificant they are. She was also told as long as she approved of something herself, it would be fine in his eyes. Still, to avoid any unnecessary complications, it was best to leave the right of final approval to her master. After all, even Albedo makes mistakes.

There was one time when she was about to send some idiotic scum and his family to the Frozen Prison for an affront to her master (at least it was in her opinion) and asked if the conviction should be for indignity or idiocy. To her great surprise, her master objected to the punishment.

I knew Momonga-sama was a merciful one, yet I still...

Hmm... Albedo pouted her lips. For her it was truly a rare expression to make, and one that only surfaces for a moment when her master is not there.

Before long, her smile returned as she picked up the next binder. While reading, her mind became preoccupied with something else. Among all of the Floor Guardians, there was one that she should stay the most vigilant for —

Demiurge.

As the operations against the Holy Kingdom had drawn to an end, Demiurge had been busy traveling far and wide to set up an intelligence agency with Nazarick at its center. To Albedo, the agency could prove to be problematic. It would have been fine if it were to be headed by Albedo, the Guardian Overseer herself, but it was not unlikely that the newly created position would be given to Demiurge. That would be a troublesome situation.

If possible, she would love to take that authority for herself by letting an easily manipulated puppet chair the agency.

A few faces came to mind, but they were all lacking in some capacity.

If I cannot get the job, then the only eligible candidate by a far margin would be Pandora's Actor. It'd be very difficult to wrestle that much authority from Demiurge...

It would not be impossible for him to learn of Albedo's true intentions[2] if that were to happen.

If that were to be the case it would become a great cause of concern. It was probably best not to do anything rash for now.

Her older sister might be a decent choice, but she was not an ally that Albedo could trust unconditionally. If she figures out Albedo's true intentions, it was entirely possible for them to become enemies.

Her younger sister, the strongest NPC in Nazarick, would probably stay by her side even if she found out about Albedo's plan. That, however, was because her creator had ordered her to obey Albedo's commands.

Haah. What a mess.

They were understaffed.

No, manpower was not the only thing they lacked. There was also the matter of the funds that Albedo herself could spend freely. In that case, her master's plan to expand operations outside of Nazarick had worked to her favor.

The reorganized Adventurer's Guild can be by my... Mare's actions... the need to be on the alert for Aura... under Cocytus' command... intelligence from Victim... the value of Shalltear's transport network... amassing a secret fund from the Merchant's Guild... manpower... and also...

Demiurge and that girl, huh...

It took a mere moment for Albedo to consider matters from multiple facets,

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2. Refers to Albedo's Anti-Player Hit Squad. See Light Novel *Volume 7: The Invaders of the Large Tomb,* "Chapter 4: A Handful of Hope."

a feat no ordinary person could do, after which her brows furrowed slightly.

That would not work. I must remain cautious of Demiurge. Reaching out to that girl would also be too dangerous. If I am not careful, she might become an opponent that I would have to be wary of, even more so than Demiurge...

She completed another task while pondering all sorts of strategies and reached for another binder.

The binder contained limited amounts of information. Either a new problem was being presented, or it was prepared by someone not used to paperwork, like Shalltear.

Albedo glanced at the cover titled "Regarding the problems faced by the team supporting the Holy Kingdom's grain management."

Apparently, it was the former. Albedo could not recall anything regarding such a problem.

Did something happen? Albedo blinked a few times as she read, her eyes opening wide into smooth circles. She read it again from the beginning and after confirming its content contained no metaphors or falsehoods, her mouth opened slightly as if in a daze.

"Huh?"

Her usually dignified face appeared to be more perplexed than anything else, as if she's unable to comprehend what she'd read.

Albedo, one of the top minds of Nazarick, had an expression rarely seen by others, a testament to the situation's severity. Despite that, Albedo's lucid mind still pushed onwards, contemplating the cause and possibility of the problem being presented.

It's highly likely that the girl betrayed us but... did she accept a better offer from another organization? But according to my judgment, that offer should've been impossible to trump... No, nothing is confirmed yet. A lack of intelligence again, huh.

Whoever presented the report must explain it to her in detail. At the same time, she must discuss the matter with Demiurge, her colleague who's probably deeply linked to the problem.

Reporting to her master will have to wait till afterwards.

She browsed the two other reports, confirmed that they were not that important, and said to the maid standing behind her,

"We must hold an emergency meeting. I will go to the Seventh Floor first to discuss matters with Demiurge. If anyone comes looking for me, tell them that I'm absent for the moment."

She activated the Ring of Ainz Ooal Gown on her left ring finger as soon as she finished dictating her orders.

As the Guardian Overseer, she had to keep in her mind where every Floor Guardian was at all times.

Demiurge had just finished his work in the Holy Kingdom. In order to prepare plans against the alliance of the Council State, Slaine Theocracy, and the City-State Alliance, he should have returned to his abode on the Seventh Floor.

If Demiurge was not there she'd have to find Entoma and have her use [Message] or have her older sister investigate his whereabouts.

With that in mind, Albedo initiated the teleport.

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In the Kingdom of Re-Estize and in its capital, Re-Estize.

There lies the castle Ro-Lente, which contains the Valencia Palace, within which is an office.

In the office where generations of kings performed their duties, its rightful owner, Ramposa III, was nowhere to be found. Instead, the room was being occupied by the Second Prince, Zanac Valleon Igana Ryle Vaiself.

Zanac's face grew dark as he examined the documents that were submitted, and a heavy sigh escaped his mouth. Surely no one could keep a cheerful expression after reading through said documents, its contents detailed the current state of the Kingdom.

During the Battle of the Katze Plains, though it would be more accurate to call it a massacre, much of the Kingdom's population lost their lives. Even so, it wasn't as though the damage inflicted on the Kingdom was lethal. Its population was around nine million and of that 180,000 died, a mere 2% loss. Plus, a multitude of them were the second or third sons of farmers so they were practically "spare men." In other cases, they had lost apprentices with barely any experience. So although saying this out loud would sound cruel, nothing of value was lost through their deaths.

Still, they had lost 4% of their male population, those who were young and strong to boot. The negative impact of this loss was gradually becoming apparent and this was all clearly outlined in the document.

Zanac let out a groan as he placed the document on the table, his vision

shifting focus to the other person in the room.

"Oy, sister. How would you deal with this if you were in charge?"

Upon hearing the question, his sister, Renner Theiere Chardelon Ryle Vaiself, who sat on a chaise longue far away from him, smiled as she raised her head. Renner, who was looking through a different set of documents had a worrisome smile.

"Even if you asked me what I would do... Onii-sama, how can I give an answer when you haven't even given me enough details in your question?"

"It's about this."

Zanac did not bother with an explanation, he just picked up the documents he had laid down and fanned them around. Renner stood up, walked towards Zanac, and took the documents from him.

"...This?"

After scanning the document from top to bottom, Renner replied in a casual tone.

"That... there's nothing we can do about it, right?"

"Dear gods..."

Zanac raised his head towards the sky.

If his sister, who was much more brilliant than him, said this, then there really wasn't anything they could do about it. However, as rulers, they could not just give up on something like this so easily.

"Is this matter really that troublesome? It's true that our nation's strength has waned temporarily, but that's all it is, it's only temporary. I don't believe that it's serious enough to warrant us doing something about it?"

"If our nation's power is weakened, then people will start to die from starvation, right?"

Due to the repeated clashes they have had with the Empire, their inability to store sufficient grain had continued on to the present day. It was in these conditions that they ceded the crucial grain-producing region of E-Rantel, which was directly under the king's rule, to the Sorcerer Kingdom. The loss of life on the battlefield also meant that they lost a sizable chunk of their labor force.

Perhaps the consequent effects were not as pronounced for now, but years down the line, it was highly likely that the decrease in grain production would cause the price of grain to skyrocket till the point where the poor could no longer afford it. No, it was safe to say that this was definitely going to happen.

"That makes sense."

"That makes *so much sense!* Say, sister, if it's as *insignificant* as you make it out to be, how will we deal with the chance that a drought or a cold snap occurs, causing crop failure?"

"High-level druids seem to have the ability to control the weather, so I believe we'll at least have a way to deal with the issues that arise regarding the amount of sunlight available. Since we'd only have to hire adventurers for it, it would be highly cost-effective. Still, whether or not such high-level druid adventurers exist is something we should find out as soon as possible. If this was in the past we could've always relied on adventurers from the Empire in cases of emergency, but now that the Empire has become a vassal state of the Sorcerer Kingdom, that could prove to be difficult."

"Ah, I see, let's handle droughts this way then. What about cold snaps, sister?"

"Druids would have to work hard on that as well."

Zanac carefully observed Renner's face, one that's all too familiar to him.

Does she not know about that? Zanac wondered.

As Renner said, high-level druids can cast spells to create temporary rain, so droughts could be dealt with. However, he remembered hearing from Marquis Raeven, his confidant, that druidic magic is powerless against cold snaps.

For a cold snap, the weather must be maintained throughout the entire season. To that end, a high-level druid must be assigned to each village. It was simply not realistic to gather a few hundred high level druids, which were rare to begin with.

This level of knowledge in magic was not part of conventional education, so it wasn't taught even in noble families. This fact applied to the royalty as well. The only reason Prince Zanac knew what he knew about druids was because he had actively sought out that information.

The fact that magic casters didn't hold any status in the Kingdom was probably to blame. If it was like the Empire where someone as great as the Tri-Arts Magic Caster exists, it might have been a completely different story. However, the Kingdom's ignorance of magic and desire for brave, strong cavalrymen had already become deeply rooted in their culture. A magic caster capable of changing the status quo never appeared.

As a result, nobles who believed that "magic is cowardice" on the battlefield passed that notion along to the next generations. Ignorance about magic turned into disdain, and a vicious cycle was born.

To Zanac, magic was an art with incredible power. For people to distance

themselves away from it due to old, boring traditions would bring about a day when the Kingdom would unconditionally lose in the struggle for power with its neighboring countries akin to death by asphyxiation. Zanac had therefore considered hiring a teacher who was knowledgeable in magic for his future children. Some nobles should follow suit once they find out the royalty is being educated in that field, right?

No, even without doing something like that, the appearance of the Sorcerer King, one who commands powerful magic, caused a paradigm shift in the minds of the Kingdom's citizens, noble or otherwise. Perhaps the era when everyone would want to learn about magic had finally come.

Though it was disappointing that the trigger for change was an external source, it was ultimately beneficial to the Kingdom so they acquiesced.

Considering the current state of the Kingdom, it was natural for Renner to not know. Even a genius would arrive at the wrong answer on unfamiliar turf. Blindly trusting in his sister could prove to be very dangerous.

Renner, however, was close with the adamantite-ranked adventurers' team Blue Rose, so obtaining detailed information on a spell was probably not too difficult for her. Was it really possible that his sister, a person that could be described as a singularity of intelligence, knew of the problem but didn't bother to check with her sources?

Then again, Renner had no reason to lie about such a small detail. It was probably just a rare manifestation of her human side; in other words, she's being a dork.

It was clear that Renner had no interest in the throne, her goal seemed tiny to Zanac. It's better to say that her goal would become unachievable should she ascend to the throne. Even if she's plotting against him, it wouldn't benefit her directly.

"—Sister, a cold snap is difficult to deal with even with the power of a druid."

"Is that so? If that's the case then it would be quite unfortunate. Ah! But the problem is about grain, right? We have plenty of supplies so it's not a problem. That's excellent news, Onii-sama."

Zanac made the exact opposite face as Renner's smile.

"By grain, you meant that? I would not want to touch that... are you sure people won't turn undead from eating too much of it?"

If one were to ask the question "does the Kingdom have surplus grain?", the answer would be yes: a generous supply sat waiting in some merchants'

warehouses. But, they shouldn't make plans that relied on said grain, because it was technically not the Kingdom's.

The Sorcerer Kingdom, ruled by the terror that was the Sorcerer King, leased those warehouses from merchants of the Kingdom and put grain there. Such a thing had never occurred throughout the entire history of the Kingdom.

Apparently the merchants were allowed to sell the grain, but its price was a bit higher than market price due to a tariff. The price was set by the Sorcerer Kingdom with no room for negotiation. As such, the people did not buy any and it just sat there in the warehouses.

The Kingdom's wealth was not flowing into the Sorcerer Kingdom at the moment, so frankly this was not detrimental to the Kingdom. The current situation made it feel like everything was fine. But Zanac, concurring with Renner, thought that was part of the Sorcerer Kingdom's strategy.

"The Holy Kingdom is consuming the same grain, so the grain itself should be harmless, right?"

"No, perhaps they wanted us to think that way and only the grain in the capital was tainted?"

Renner smiled bitterly.

"You don't really think so, do you?"

"Well, I guess not. Afterall, we checked the contents."

Regarding the usage of the warehouses in the capital, the Sorcerer Kingdom's official statement was that it was to store grain to be used as food aid for the Holy Kingdom. Apparently plans were made to transport the grain to the Holy Kingdom from these warehouses.

Regarding the logistics:

Due to a lack of protection for the caravans, if they were to be attacked by bandits or monsters, the responsibility for that would fall on the Sorcerer Kingdom. Hiring mercenaries would be the obvious solution, but the Sorcerer Kingdom proposed to simply install a flag that would make it extraordinarily obvious that those carriages belonged to them, apparently as some form of self-defense. The Kingdom, wishing to avoid unnecessary conflicts, agreed to the Sorcerer Kingdom's proposals under the conditions that their undead are not to enter the Kingdom's borders and that a transit tax must be paid. Looking back on it now, accepting it was undoubtedly an erroneous decision.

They had essentially allowed caravans hoisting the Sorcerer Kingdom's flag to march through the royal capital in procession, all the way to the docks where

they were bound for the Holy Kingdom. This clearly showed, to both domestic and foreign eyes, how weak the Kingdom appeared compared to the Sorcerer Kingdom. Never mind the fact that the Sorcerer Kingdom appeared enthusiastic about such aid, and those shipments were frequent and continued on to this day.

If a nation's dignity was lost bit by bit like this, sooner or later the Kingdom would have to choose between a full rebellion against the Sorcerer Kingdom or kneel in servitude to them. It's theorized that the Empire had already experienced such an attack and was forced to choose the latter. It's an insidious plot, but an undeniably effective one.

What's worse is the fact that they were doing this in the name of humanitarian aid, so it was virtually impossible for the Kingdom to refuse.

The Archfiend that had once turned the Kingdom's capital upside down, the one who was eventually defeated by the Sorcerer King, Jaldabaoth, had led an army of demi-humans to attack the Holy Kingdom. The Northern region had been torn asunder and was barely even recognizable. Compared to the damage sustained by the Kingdom, the Holy Kingdom suffered a worse fate. At least according to what Zanac heard.

Though the northern half of the Holy Kingdom was almost completely destroyed, its southern half was barely touched.

After the Holy Queen passed away and the new king ascended to the throne, the death of the nobles in the north caused general unrest in their lands, the nobles to the south began feuding internally, and other similar incidents caused quite a bit of trouble for the Holy Kingdom.

The simultaneous conflicts caused the two halves of the Holy Kingdom to fight over power and their own interests.

The result was delayed aid for the people of the north, some could not even reliably acquire food.

Their saving grace was the grain provided by the Sorcerer Kingdom, the grain that was being shipped from the Kingdom's warehouses to the Holy Kingdom through land and sea routes.

An absolutely brilliant plan, Zanac thought.

In such dire straits, they had no time for scruples about where the food came from, even if it was from one of the undead.

"If it were us providing the food aid instead, the goodwill that the Sorcerer King has been receiving would have undoubtedly been ours. But... there's no way we could do that in these conditions."

What if that battle never happened?

No, at the bare minimum, if Jaldabaoth had not plundered all kinds of resources during the chaos in the royal capital they would at least be in a better position than they were now. If they had been the ones to provide the Holy Kingdom with food aid, there would be no way that undead's reputation would be as good as it is now.

But that was not what happened. After receiving news of the new king's coronation, the diplomat sent by the Kingdom was given the cold shoulder according to reports afterward. This wasn't a cold war caused by national policies that antagonized neighboring countries. The relationship between the two countries had never been this bad during the reign of the late Holy Queen, Calca Bessarez.

Perhaps relations began souring before the grain shortage, back when the Kingdom refused to provide military support against Jaldabaoth's invasion of the Holy Kingdom. That might've dealt a fatal blow to their relationship.

Of course, sending aid at that time was completely out of the question.

After all, it had been an even more chaotic time for the Kingdom due to the heavy losses inflicted by the powerful magic of the Sorcerer King, Ainz Ooal Gown. In addition, they had lost some of their most celebrated warriors, the most important of which was the Warrior-Captain Gazef Stronoff, famed for being the strongest in the entire Kingdom. What aid could they have provided against such a powerful demon at that time?

Whatever they could say now would only sound like some bitter excuse from a heartless kingdom, but any other country in the same position as the Kingdom that received such a plea for help would respond in the same way. Only the Sorcerer Kingdom sent both military and domestic aid, so the Kingdom paled in comparison.

In fact, the Northern Holy Kingdom had already become quite favorably inclined towards the Sorcerer Kingdom according to the diplomats.

"Problem after problem without solutions caused a delay in responding..."

It was at this moment when he could finally see the bigger picture and the equally bigger problem. Though this seemed to be the confluence of numerous coincidences, the situation could give one the false impression that everything was connected.

"No, could it be—"

"Onii-sama!"

"Oh!... Oy, sister. I can hear you alright, no need to shout. I'm not that old."

"...Because you've ignored your own sister who's standing right here in front of you to drift off into your own thoughts, I'll create some nasty memories of you as revenge. Or were you thinking about something?"

"Nothing, just... being a bit too paranoid."

Renner turned towards him, her eyes filled with pity, "I'm not too sure, but that has to be it. You talk about negative things all the time, so naturally, every one of your trains of thought would inevitably veer towards the worst-case scenarios."

That made sense.

"Maybe."

"Mhm, that has to be it... About the Holy Kingdom, the schism between north and south means they're only a step away from a civil war, right? If that's the case, then which side will win? Though the exhausted north doesn't seem to have a fighting chance at all..."

"Well, perhaps. The fact that someone of great renown from the north died is an influential factor. After all, that female paladin[3] died too..."

"I don't know much about that. Was it someone famous?"

"Mhm. From what I heard she could be tied with our Warrior-Captain. She visited our Kingdom once, it's a shame we couldn't meet."

Skipping the normal sequence of meetings to grant immediate audience to an unofficial envoy was not appropriate for both parties.

The royal family would be looked down upon if the meeting came too early. By the time diplomats made that judgment they had already left the capital.

If they knew what they do now, they should have set up a meeting with her no matter what. Perhaps it could've helped them gain a potential backup option for the future.

"Back then, your judgment was diplomatically correct. If it wasn't for you telling me not to do it all the time, I would have thought that it was not that big of a deal to meet them. Having the king meet them right away would have definitely been inappropriate, but if a prince did so, it should have been fine."

"Wasn't it Onii-sama who made the final decision himself...?"

Renner pouted. It was an expression cute enough to easily win over the heart of any man, a countless number of people had already fallen victim to it.

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3. Refers to Remedios Custodio.

“Onii-sama is the current successor to the throne, but not everyone approves of you behind closed doors. Any possible cause of gossip, however small, must be avoided. It would trouble me a lot if you don’t secure the throne. Oh, and causing a rebellion right now would be a problem as well. If that happens, you wouldn’t be able to fulfill your promise.”

“Mhm, that’s true…”

She did not disguise her intentions at all, but it was convincing nonetheless.

“Hm, normally this is how things would go… the Sorcerer Kingdom has been providing aid to the Northern Holy Kingdom, if all went according to their plans, they would have an easily manipulated country in their hands. Should we try to contact the south?”

If it was the Northern Holy Kingdom that was maintaining amicable relations with the Sorcerer Kingdom, then the south must view the Sorcerer Kingdom as their enemy. If the Kingdom were to form an alliance with the south, it was possible they could contain the Sorcerer Kingdom’s efforts somewhat.

“That’s true, it would certainly be a desirable development. There’s another reason the two halves are against each other, namely the faceless progenitor’s new teachings, that can’t be good for the Kingdom either.”

“Aaaaah, that one…”

The Faceless One.[4]

A nickname for the proselytizer who showed up after the chaos caused by Jaldabaoth. Though it appeared that her true name was made public, the nickname had already spread much further than her real name.

Her teaching, treasured by her many followers, was that “Weakness without the drive to improve one’s self is a sin, everyone must strive towards the goal of becoming stronger.” That was more or less an understandable concept for most people.

Though there was widespread support for her teachings in the north, it was not only unpopular but also shunned in the south.

However, this was the predictable outcome. To the ruling class, that kind of mentality would only invite instability to those who are at the top.

Perhaps that was the main reason why the nobles in the south, who still retained their authority, and the rapidly deteriorating north were at each other’s throats.

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4. Refers to Neia Baraja.

What was led by the Faceless One was more of a community than a religion. Because of that, the Four Great Gods were still being worshipped as usual and problems with religious institutions never arose. At the same time, the newly crowned Holy King gave his acquiescence to the group, further dividing the north and the south.

"...By common sense, isn't it odd to hide one's face?"

Apparently the Faceless One always appeared in public wearing a mask.

The diplomatic mission sent from the Kingdom had the same questions in mind as Zanac concerning the Faceless One, so they asked her followers. It did not matter who they asked, each and every one of their answers were vague at best, as if they would be breaking some form of taboo should they have answered truthfully.

It was incredibly suspicious.

By hiding her face, is she not creating the impression that she had done something unspeakable in the past?

"Her parents were apparently renowned warriors. If she had revealed her face and preached out in the open, it would probably have raised her reputation by a fair amount. Is it possible that she's hiding her appearance because she's been lying about her heritage?"

"Why would someone spread such a boring lie? I don't think any of the benefits of hiding one's appearance would apply to her if that's the case."

"That's true...or perhaps she's not human, but undead or something similar?"

"—You mean she's serving under the Sorcerer King?"

"I just thought that if that were the case, things would start to make a lot more sense, wouldn't they?"

"It could explain a lot of things, but why would someone like that risk arousing further suspicion from others by hiding their appearance?"

"That's also true... but what other acceptable reasons are there to hide one's appearance?"

"It's also possible that she had received some form of facial disfigurement during Jaldabaoth's invasion, but then again it should have been treatable with magic. Unless wounds inflicted by a fiend as strong as Jaldabaoth cannot be healed with magic or something similar?"

"Well, that's more believable than your previous theory, especially since she's female."

Exposing a facial scar could be beneficial in the sense that people would

sympathize with you more, but that's largely dependent on how severe the wound was.

"In any case, our first order was to gather detailed information on the inner workings of the Holy Kingdom. Let's plan our operations out in a way where we could immediately aid in the south should that become necessary."

"That would be best."

"To our south is the Holy Kingdom, where half of the country is friendly to the Sorcerer Kingdom and to our east is the Empire, a vassal state of the Sorcerer Kingdom. This will be hard to deal with."

"Yeah."

Zanac's gaze remained affixed on Renner, who had been replying ever so nonchalantly.

"...You make it sound so simple."

"Eh? But what more could be said about this? The situation is undeniably worse if you consider the current state of our neighboring countries. Other than what Onii-sama has said so far, there's also the matter of the persisting and prospering underground organizations in the Kingdom."

"You're talking about the Eight Fingers, correct? Recently there have been a number of people making a mess all over the place due to narcotics withdrawal. So have they really become active again? If it wasn't for that Archfiend Jaldabaoth appearing out of nowhere, we could've knocked the Eight Fingers down another peg or two for sure."

Zanac sighed.

With the loss of Gazef Stronoff, the strongest warrior in the Kingdom, the government had shifted its policy to avoid direct confrontation with the Eight Fingers. They simply lacked the necessary number of strong individuals to deal with the issue.

Except one.

The man employed by Renner, Brain Unglaus, had a lot of potential.

But, that man was only loyal to Renner, so there's probably no chance at all that he'd be willing to serve Zanac. He had already attempted to gain favor with him, but it did not seem to have an effect on him at all.

...I don't plan on taking on the role of Warrior-Captain myself, so it's probably better to promote someone who's talented enough for the job. Should we train him to become someone who's worthy of the position of Warrior-Captain? I wanted to at least give him the sword that's part of the Kingdom's treasures, but father would never allow it.

To his father, the king, Gazef Stronoff's existence was far too important.

It's lonely at the top, as they say.

Knowing that soon it'll be his turn to bear this burden, Zanac, unbeknownst to himself, is gradually grasping the true meaning of that proverb.

As a person, Gazef Stronoff's existence was like that of a comforting bonfire to his lonely father. Despite the significant age difference between the two, one could say that they were closer than friends in some respects.

For his father to have someone like that in his life, Zanac couldn't help but feel envious.

As the Second Prince, Zanac had never experienced that level of friendship before. His older brother was the heir apparent for the longest time, so no one would bother forming that deep of a connection with someone who was simply a spare. They probably judged that it was not worth the risk of getting on Marquis Boullope's radar by befriending a future Archduke.

The only one who'd keep in touch with him was Marquis Raeven, presumably out of his concern for the Kingdom's future. Even then their relationship was closer to that of mutual supporters than friends; as a result, Zanac had repressed quite a bit of the ensuing depression.

Will he remain lonely for the rest of his life?

Zanac shook his head, pushing his negative emotions aside. Renner looked back at him as if she was looking at a cryptid.

Just ignore her, Zanac.

Speaking of Brain, the moment Zanac is crowned king, his first action would likely be to retrieve the four treasures of the Kingdom from his father.

Though he was uncertain if his father would hand them over so easily, it's imperative for him to entrust the treasures to Brain, otherwise it would be an insult to the sacrifices he's made.

He wasn't the Kingdom's Warrior-Captain, he was just Renner's subordinate, a peasant with no fealty to speak of. If the Kingdom's treasures were to be given to him, there would be no doubt the nobles would have dissenting opinions against it.

Even so.

"How about we just declare that we intend to become a vassal state of the Sorcerer Kingdom?"

Renner's goal was to live out her life in a small manor with Climb, which would still be achievable even if they became a vassal state. No, it's safe to say

that if the value of royalty fell, it would have an inverse effect on their personal safety. Perhaps Renner's suggestion would create the best outcome for her.

"Hmph!" Zanac scoffed at Renner's proposal, "The state of the internal affairs of our country and that of the Empire's is completely different. Civil disorder would occur the moment we suggest it."

Under the leadership of the Bloody Emperor, the Empire was as solid as a rock. Dissenting nobles had been purged long ago, which is why when they chose to become a vassal state, there was no opposition whatsoever. Never mind the fact that the Empire hadn't had a taste of the Sorcerer Kingdom's wrath. Even if they were disgusted by the agreement on the inside, it's not as though they had the desire to seek retribution. The Empire had a clear-cut understanding of exactly how terrifying the Sorcerer Kingdom could be. The Kingdom, however, was in a different situation.

As of now, the Kingdom was split between the Royal Faction, the Noble Faction, independents, and a new faction which was formed shortly after that battle. The distribution of power between the four factions was roughly 3:3:2:2.

The most troublesome of them all was the new faction. It was composed mostly of "spare men" from noble families that had lost both their head and successor, men who obtained power not meant for them. The other members lacked the common sensibilities that were expected of the aristocracy and had no respect for the unspoken rules. As a result, many of them lacked integrity and manners. Spy reports showed that more than a few of them were drunk on power.

They were the cancer of this nation.

However, since they had autonomy in their own lands, nothing could be done about them unless they broke the law of the Kingdom. Even if they did, there was no guarantee on how the other factions would react when the royal powers were exercised. This was no longer the pre-war era when the royal faction held the upper hand in political power.

Still, Renner's suggestion of vassalization was not totally out of the question. It could be considered if the situation was to change drastically.

"No, that will not happen. There will not be any civil disorder, Onii-sama."

Renner naturally followed with a counter.

Don't lie to me, Zanac thought.

Although he could tell that she wasn't being serious, it would not have been a problem even if Zanac was stupid enough to fall for it. Zanac had learned to see

through her facades long ago.

It was precisely because of this reason that women like her should not be trusted.

If only Elias had returned.

Zanac suddenly felt a sense of loneliness deep down in his heart. Though he couldn't call Marquis Raeven a friend, he was still someone who shared Zanac's concerns for the Kingdom. Zanac was concerned by the fact that it may no longer be possible for them to work side by side with each other, as the marquis' replacements at hand were all terrifyingly talented but also uncontrollable wildcards.

Zanac turned to face Renner in a pretentious manner, as if doing so would rid him of his sorrows.

"Still, I find it hard to believe that the Empire would actually import goods from the Sorcerer Kingdom."

"...Well *that* was an awkward way to change the topic, not that I mind... hm, those things aren't that bad for a vassal state like the Empire, right?"

The most exported goods from the Sorcerer Kingdom to the Empire in terms of the revenue they generated were undead creatures. Apparently they were distinguished by categories such as menial labor, military service, cargo transportation, and so on.

"Oy oy, we're talking about the undead, remember? The enemy of the living?"

"But they don't require sustenance and don't get tired. Frankly speaking, they're the best kind of worker you could hope for. You're correct in thinking that importing the Sorcerer King's undead into our country would be risky since it would essentially be us allowing another nation's soldiers onto our own soil. But on the other hand, it's also a gesture to the Sorcerer Kingdom that its vassal does not have anything to hide from them. They're basically handing the other end of the leash they've placed on themselves over to the Sorcerer Kingdom."

Renner raised her head towards the ceiling.

"In some ways, this is an admirable attitude that we could learn from. It is a good way to show that they can easily threaten us."

"That's true, if a superior cannot trust their inferior, it's definitely more reassuring to have a firm grasp on their weaknesses. I can somewhat understand the Empire's actions if I look at it from that perspective. It looks as though E-Rantel and the Dwarven nation in the Azerlisia mountains have initiated trade relations. They're exchanging undead miners and fresh ingredients for ores and

high-quality, Dwarven-made farming equipment."

This was according to the intel they had received from their spy in E-Rantel, who had met with some Dwarves.

"Cargo hauling within the Azerlisian Mountain Range can simply be handled by the undead. Apparently the shipping and labor costs are basically negligible, so much so that it's cheaper for them to buy from the Dwarves than from us."

"That's right."

"—Are we abandoning the plans to form an alliance with the Council State?"

"Ah yes, that's currently in progress, but the situation isn't great. Though a Dragon Lord has agreed to it, we still need more time to convince the representatives of the other races. Though even if this falls through, the prospect of an alliance would not be completely ruled out, that much was said."

That was only partly true.

The anti-Sorcerer Kingdom alliance was forming at a snail's pace, but progress was smooth nonetheless. They were at the stage of relying on the generosity and solidarity of other countries to hopefully get them to sign the mutual reinforcement pact at all costs, in other words, it was an unreliable relationship without written agreements. Something like that could not be publicly announced as an alliance.

There were simply too many things to do to form a tight alliance, they would need at least a few months to sort it out.

"Is that so...? It would be great if we could form a military alliance as soon as possible. Now then, Onii-sama, when do you plan to take the throne? I feel like it's about time for you to fulfill your promise."

The promise in question was that Renner would work alongside Zanac in exchange for a manor to live in secret with Climb, as well as the permission to do so.

"About that, just wait for a while. Surely you already knew of how the unofficial proposals are being dealt with soon? I've spoken to our father and we've decided to wait for him to put forward his last major policy before making any moves."

If the king commits a fatal mistake in managing the state, he will bear the responsibility and abdicate.

If he made no mistakes, he would just propose more and more policies that are designed to upset the nobility, to allow the Prince the opportunity to propose alleviating measures in order to reduce their dissatisfaction. The king

would then be abdicating in a fashion that would gain him favor with the nobles. Although a stigma could be left on the elderly king's reign, the benefits to the royal family far outweighed the detriments.

"Speaking of which, how's the orphanage going? Are you planning to cook something for them again? Do you need any financial support?"

"That's not necessary, my allowance is enough for its operations."

There should be somewhere around 50 of them by now.

This was a significant figure, perhaps the greatest among all the orphanages in the Kingdom. Despite that, Renner had not sought external support in running the orphanage's operations, which were funded entirely through her privy purse. Although as the Third Princess her allowance did not amount to much, it did substantially increase once her two older sisters were married off. It's certainly not impossible for her to fund the orphanage on her own, but big cuts in the number of maids tending to her must've been made to allow for that.

Now that he thought about it, his sister seemed to only wear one set of clothes.

The royalty should never do something that'll make the nobility look down on them. Zanac felt somewhat irritated but also proud that Renner knew how to spend her funds wisely.

"Hmm, do you want me to split some of my allowances with you? After all, the orphanage is an impressive feat in the eyes of the citizens."

"I cannot allow that."

Her rejection was uncharacteristically staunch.

"If there are outstanding children in the orphanage, I intend to take them with me to the manor. I will not allow you to take any of my prospective labor force~"

"Aah, so that's your plan...?"

"Exactly, I've requested Brain-san to help train them in swordsmanship. They should also start schooling soon. My efforts to nurture them have just begun."

"Then what about the children who are not so exceptional?"

"Even if they could only do simple calculations or write, there will be a job waiting for them somewhere. Everything will work out just fine."

"So you would be fine with it if I take the rest of them?"

"If you would do that it would make me very happy. I won't have to worry that some of the children will be left behi—"

Renner's voice was interrupted by the sound of someone violently knocking on the door.

"—What, what's going on? What's with the commotion!"

Just as Zanac raised his voice, the door was suddenly opened.

"Your Highness! Emergency!"

A noble dressed in familiar court attire ran into the room. He was one of the officials in charge of internal affairs. Tightly gripped in his hand was a piece of parchment.

"What happened!"

Zanac took one look at the parchment presented to him and a surprised expression could be seen on his face. It was as though he could not comprehend its contents. No, it was more like he was in disbelief.

"What's wrong?"

Zanac did not have the strength to reply, instead, he just passed the parchment paper to Renner in silence. And then—

"Hah?"

The sound that she made was uncharacteristic for her, it sounded like she was absolutely dumbfounded.

Oh look, she's exposing her human side again. Zanac grinned in a way as if he had just given in to his despair.



Chapter 1 An Unexpected Move

1

A big swig of pale ale was taken from a mug that was almost overflowing.

This used to be a beverage that he had no chance of obtaining back in his demesne, but nowadays the taste of first-class booze flowing down his throat felt all too familiar.

He noisily belched out the sweet fragrance of the ale as he set down the large mug, with half of its contents still remaining, back onto the table. If this were one of those wooden mugs he was so used to, he would've slammed it down onto the table without a second thought, but he wouldn't dare do so with the porcelain stuff.

However, even if he did break the mug he wouldn't have to pay for it; after all, this tavern was specially prepared by his secret supporter, Hilma Cygnaeus. Everything was free of charge for any of the nobles he would invite to this place, this policy even extended to their guests.

This kind of investment was to be expected for someone who's destined to become a powerful noble like he was, Baron Philip Dayton L'Eyre Montserrat.

All he had to do was to show his gratitude and repay her for this favor later on, for now everything is kept on tabs.

As things stood, even Hilma, whose wealth was beyond comparison to Philip's, was still a commoner and had to bow before authority. Perhaps that was the reason why she was trying so hard to become acquainted with a noble like Philip by supporting his faction on all fronts.

This is what separates the strong from the weak in this world — the difference in status.

Still, he owed her a big favor for all of her efforts.

As a gentleman who held himself accountable for all his debts, Philips hoped to improve his social standing as soon as possible. Hilma should also be expecting him to obtain authority above the rank of baron at the very least.

Then he'd have to repay his dues.

If those favors were not repaid as soon as possible, he would be stuck making concessions, having to obtain permission even for things he personally wanted to do.

To have the freedom to do whatever he wanted and the right to use his powers as he sees fit, those were Philip's dreams.

But—

"Why is nothing going my way!"

He could no longer hold in his true feelings. Philip surveyed his surroundings. This tavern was not a regular peasants' bar. Hilma had converted one of her mansions into a tavern so crude noise had no place in it. So although his voice wasn't too loud to begin with, if there were someone around they probably would've heard him.

After confirming that no one was looking towards him, Philip calmed down.

To allow others to find out that he had failed would be disgraceful.

That's right — he had failed.

Die, you're all trash!

Philip gulped down ale as if it could quench the fiery emotions in his heart. This only agitated him further as in his hurry, drops of ale had leaked from the corners of his lips, causing his skin and clothes to feel sticky as a result.

Philip's expression twisted in anger.

If all had gone according to his plans, the output of his demesne would have been multiplied and he should have been surrounded by people grateful that he was their new lord. His name should've been known to all after the neighboring nobles caught wind of his accomplishments.

So, how did it end up like this?

Not only had the grain productivity of his lands started to fall, he also felt as though the villagers he had visited were all staring at him with contempt.

Insolent scumbags!

He was finally the head of the house of Montserrat, a family with a long and dated history, those villagers should've known full well how they should pay their respects. Could it be possible that the villagers were all slacking off in an attempt to weaken his position?

It was certainly possible.

The world was filled with imbeciles who would be envious of others' talents after all. They couldn't even understand his talents and only scoffed at and got envious of those with talents. In that way they could create an illusion of megalomania.

No, it was not as though that was the only type of people in the world. There were so many villagers back there, there had to be some other reason for it. For example, a neighboring lord may have paid them to sabotage Philip's political ambitions.

It was certainly not impossible.

In general, if you focused production on more valuable goods, revenue would naturally rise by huge proportions. This should've been common sense. Wouldn't it make sense to dedicate all the available farmland to the more valuable crops and buy grain from traders?

It was so obvious yet the number of people who'd disagree with him were countless.

Absolute trash! How about I ask Hilma about how I should punish these fools? If I do that they'll certainly start working hard for me again! I'll still need to investigate if they're conspiring against me, their lord! ...No, wait. If it's something as simple as dishing out punishments, it'd be fine if I approve of it on my own, right?

In theory, it'd be the same as whipping cows and horses to get them to obey you.

Yeah, there's no need to tell Hilma about this at all. If I end up owing her another favor from this... Umu, Hilma's been good to me for quite a while, it's about time that I repay her generosity...

To a soon-to-be great noble, debt owed to a commoner like Hilma could be bilked, it was an easily exploitable situation. But alas, doing so would make him no different than a common thief. As a noble among nobles, such an act was utterly despicable, so it's best to quickly pay her back as much as possible.

It would be a big problem if he let Hilma have something to threaten him with due to his generosity. If that ever happened, Hilma could always have things her way and shut Philip up.

The question is, what would be the best form of repayment in this case...?

If he's going by their previous agreement, he would have to repay her in gold collected from the increased revenue of his land, but that's obviously not possible — nay, it would be difficult to do so at the moment.

So what was something that he could do that would both demonstrate his brilliance and also leverage the newly formed faction's power to benefit Hilma?

I say that, but I still don't have total control over this faction yet...

As a member of the faction, Philip had been given the opportunity to connect with all kinds of people.

Though the number of members supporting the idea that Philip should be the faction's leader was steadily rising, he hadn't gained the support of the entire aristocracy.

Hilma had aided him in that pursuit, but considering his age, social standing, et cetera, there were still some major hurdles he had yet to overcome. If Philip was to be in their position, he would be inclined to agree with their decisions too.

The same speech given by a senior earl and a junior baron would not be convincing to the same degree.

But doesn't that sound like they'll just be conforming to the traditions of the more established factions? Philip thought.

Being members of a new faction, they could not act like some aging organization but should rather introduce radical changes into the system. As a man with the courage to experiment and innovate, Philip was the perfect fit for the role of leader in this faction.

All the other guys are just so inflexible.

Blinded by his feelings of irritation, Philip did not notice his mug had somehow become empty.

"Oy! More booze!"

"Yes, my lord."

Some maid that looked like she's employed at the establishment was just passing by, so he barked his orders at her.

After taking a deep bow, she walked away in an odd manner, as if striking a pose, and Philip was unable to take his eyes off of her. Was it because her

uniform was too thin? One could make out the shape of her buttocks.

"Ooof!"

An attractive derriere is obviously a desirable quality to flaunt with, but this maid had demonstrated a clear understanding of what constitutes an acceptable interaction between a superior and their inferior through her work ethic. This pleased Philip a lot.

Philip had already borrowed two maids from Hilma who were not so dissimilar to the one he's staring at.

These ladies would do anything you ask of them, you could even stiff their salaries. Every one of Philip's household matters had been handled by them. Hilma also recommended people like butlers and exclusive merchants.

Though Philip wanted to fire those who had been under his family's employ for a long time and just keep his subordinates at hand, his father's fervent rejection of that proposal made him give up. Well, if he was the one paying for those servants then he would have definitely fired them to save expenses.

As Philip vaguely thought about these matters, someone spoke to him suddenly.

"Oh hey, Baron Montserrat. What's going on? You seem troubled."

He turned his head towards the source of the voice to see two nobles in front of him.

They had inherited their baronies at the same time, friends who belonged to the same faction. One of them carried a large mug topped with ale while the other held a plateful of nuts.

"Oh! Baron Delvin and Baron Rokerson!"

Baron Delvin was a man who lacked the status and prestige expected of a noble of his rank due to his short stature and delicate constitution. The only aspect of him that matched with his status would be his raiment, so if he were to wear common clothes, no one would be able to tell that he was one with the aristocracy. As it stands, you could convince a large group of people into believing that he was just an actor pretending to be a nobleman for a comedic play.

In contrast, Baron Rokerson cuts an imposing and sturdy figure. The man was thick in every dimension. Though he was a physically menacing man, he couldn't hold his own opinions without getting swayed by others. In Philip's eyes, Rokerson was more likely to be ordered around than order someone else around.

Their demesnes neighbored each other and it was a common sight for them

to be working together. Philip remembered them due to a mental note he made to himself when they first met, that being *why not just work solo like me?*

"Are these seats taken?"

"Oh, please, do take a seat."

Rokerson gave a gentle nod and sat down alongside Delvin. The maid seemed to have timed her entrance perfectly as she walked in with ale in tow.

"Here, cheers!"

"It's our pleasure!"

According to legend, the act of clinking glasses together during a toast originated as a way to mix the contents of two cups together, proving that neither were poisoned. Philip knew of this fact and so used more force than was necessary.

Alcohol was spilled onto the table.

"Oh!"

Some of it had landed onto Baron Delvin's clothing.

It would be rude to say that his clothes had finally matched his appearance, but his garments, while noble in appearance, were not fresh and clean. No, it would be more accurate to say that it was reminiscent of a more traditional style, something that Philip would wear in the past, like a hand-me-down from his elders.

Philip felt pity.

What he currently wore was top-tier fabrics he had instructed Hilma to prepare for him. In other words, those two were not valuable enough to warrant such a level of investment from Hilma.

Philip contemplated the tragedy of the apparent difference in their future prospects compared to him as he asked, "So were the two of you here for drinks too?"

"—Umu, that's right, that's right. We were just here for drinks and were pleasantly surprised to find that Baron Monserrat was here too, so we came over to pay our respects! Right?!"

"It's just as you say, Baron Rokerson."

"No no no, what's this nonsense about paying respects? Aren't we equals? Comrades who are supporting each other?"

"Oh! I never knew that someone as great as Baron Montserrat viewed people like us as equals! That does bring joy to our hearts! Right?!"

"It's just as you say. Now, if you will, please try some of these."

The man on the opposite end hastily presented the hors d'oeuvres.

"Thank you very much, Baron Rokerson."

"Oh my! We're no strangers, Baron Montserrat. Feel free to call me Wayne and him Igor."

"Understandable. Then I'd request that both of you refer to me as Philip!"

The three shared in a hearty laugh as they downed their pale ales.

"But anyways — Philip-sama, what has been bothering you? You seemed quite troubled just then."

"Just then?" At this point the alcohol had slightly — yes, only ever so slightly dulled his mind, his anger flared back up.

"Ahhh, those useless idiots keep giving me headaches. Oh, I'm talking about the peasants living on my land."

"So that's why, I completely understand! It's completely understandable for someone as sagacious as Philip-kakka to be angry over those who could never hope to grasp your thoughts. Common people like us aren't on the same level as you, right?"

"Exactly, it's completely understandable for someone as smart as Philip-kakka to be angry over such matters."

Philip was touched by their agreeing with him.

They were nobles like him, so was it natural that they could understand his troubles? They too must also be perturbed by their own subjects' stupidity.

"The two of you get what I'm going through?!"

"Umu, we do, we do. Though I'm not as outstanding as Philip-kakka, I've also had my fair share of experience with the issues you're faced with."

"Exactly — looks like we're out of ale — oy! What are you doing not pouring ale for Philip-kakka!"

The maid that was summoned immediately brought over some ale straight to Philip. He raised his mug, now filled to the brim with ale.

"Here, let us toast each other once more!"

The mugs were smacked together.

Philip downed his ale.

Delicious.

He felt as though the ale had never tasted better than in this moment, perhaps it's because he's sharing a drink with his sympathizers.

Most members of the new faction chose to distance themselves from Philip, one reason being that Philip was at the helm of the faction; consequently, he

hadn't been able to make any friends. That was why Philip was in such a good mood, these two who had approached him gave him solace. He was overjoyed to the point of wanting to rub shoulders with them.

"Ah, Philip-kakka! I'm honored that you'd rub shoulders with me, but your ale might spill. How about you down some of it first and then... oh!"

He spilled some ale again. Though it was free of charge, being so wasteful would be an insult against Hilma.

Philip removed his arm from the other noble and drank in a rambunctious manner.

"Woah! That's what I expected of you, you can certainly hold your alcohol, am I right?"

"That's right, as expected of Philip-sama!"

"Psssht! No no, that's not true. It's just that this ale tastes better than usual when enjoyed with outstanding nobles like you."

"Unbelievable! Absolutely unbelievable! Kakka would speak such words that fill my heart with joy. As the two of us have a lower tolerance for alcohol, we can't help but be in awe of your capacity."

"Eh? The two of you can't drink much?"

They were both still on their first cup and the level of ale hadn't gone down much.

"It's embarrassing to admit, but to tell the truth, neither of us can find any appeal in alcohol, right?"

"That's right, but since we're in this type of establishment it would be awkward not to drink at all, so we're only taking tiny sips."

"Because we can't hold our alcohol, we're quite envious of men who could, like Philip-kakka. Please, please, do take our portion as well."

Philip followed along with their suggestions and drank cup after cup. The more he consumed, the lighter his head felt. It was around this time when his face started turning red.

"Now that's the way to do it. I remember Philip-kakka mentioning the idiots in your land, so what happened exactly?"

"Huh? Ah, what was it, did I talk about that?"

"Yeah, you mentioned something along those lines... it appears to me that you might've had a little too much to drink, should I bring some non-alcoholic beverages over? Does that sound agreeable?"

"That's right. Philip-kakka, would you like some water? The water they serve

here does not stink of moss."

"Ehhh—, that wouldn't be necessary. I'm fine, I'm fine." Heat pulsed across his face, he didn't need a mirror to know that his face had turned completely red. "...Ahhh, I was talking about my woes. I'm broke, broke."

"We're in a similar situation, am I right?"

"That's right, our demesnes aren't exactly prospering either."

"No, no. It's not what you think it is. If those worthless peasants had done what I ordered them to, there should've been large sums of gold flooding into my pockets. But they don't work hard enough and won't listen. It's all their fault. Every single one of them is worthless."

"Oooooh! Philip-kakka is absolutely correct. This world is filled with worthless trash. I can understand your pain! By the way, what is the special product of your lands, Philip-kakka?"

"Nothing apart from agricultural produce at the moment. Damn it."

A lot of trials were being run on various aspects of production, but none had borne fruit yet.

"Agricultural produce, huh... It would be nice to have some kind of unique product, otherwise..."

"Typical agricultural products don't sell for much, but that's to be expected."

The two noblemen spoke of a lot of their own opinions.

They were correct, that was why there was a need to cultivate crops of higher value. It would be risky as it was probable that they would not be able to harvest the crop in the short-run, the fact of whether a crop could be cultivated at all or not had to be investigated too. Even so, it was a necessary investment for the future, yet those lowly peasants would always use "our hands are full" as their excuse even in the face of a direct order.

"Considering that current situation, if nothing changes then I could only wait for a bad harvest so the price of grain would go up!"

"What about your own terri—"

Wayne jabbed Igor with his elbow mid-sentence and then he moved closer to Philip to whisper.

"You're right, but even if a bad harvest occurs, the price won't necessarily rise. Did you know that there is a huge amount of cheap grain being transported from the Sorcerer Kingdom to the Kingdom? So the price for regular produce is unlikely to fluctuate much and it would be equally unlikely for any non-value-added product to fetch a high price."

“What?!”

“Ah, Philip-kakka, you’re being too loud.”

Philip surveyed his surroundings in a frenzy, lowered his voice, and then said to Wayne, “Is that true?”

“Mhm, the intel was obtained from trustworthy sources, it was being spread amongst a few of the merchants in the capital. Apparently the Sorcerer Kingdom has stored large quantities of grain in warehouses owned by the merchants in the capital. It was said that they were even allowed to sell them, but the Sorcerer Kingdom obviously had the priority input on how they were being used.”

“Hm? So it wasn’t merchants importing goods from the Sorcerer Kingdom to sell here, but rather, the Sorcerer Kingdom was storing food in the Kingdom?”

“That’s right. I don’t know much about the exact details other than the fact that it’s there for storage only and the Sorcerer Kingdom had already paid for the storage fee... or was it rent for the warehouses? In any case, the merchants made money from that deal. It wasn’t much, but it was still something.”

“...Do people just rent out their warehouses so easily?”

“Normally it would be difficult to secure storage space. But wasn’t that warehouse district attacked by that Fiend? I heard a lot of the warehouses were empty and so the owners happily leased them out. Therefore, as long as the grain remains there, the merchants are not likely to raise the price of food. It’s easy to imagine people saying things like ‘if it gets more expensive, I’d rather buy from the Sorcerer Kingdom’ should the price go up. Oh right, did you know about E-Rantel’s huge grain storehouse?”

“No, no. What of it?”

“Within this huge warehouse enchanted with the spell [Preservation], there are places where food will never rot, courtesy of a magical item. Until recently, military rations for over a hundred thousand soldiers were painstakingly collected from neighboring lands in preparation for a war with the Empire annually. Food collection takes time so it could rot during the process, not to mention that obtaining food was harder during some time periods. That huge storehouse was built to counter these problems. Apparently the magical item wasn’t something that could be transported elsewhere, so it was formally gifted to the Sorcerer Kingdom. That means the Sorcerer Kingdom’s surplus grain could be stored there for years.”

“Even if the food could last for many years, the Sorcerer Kingdom is a country with a single city, E-Rantel. How’s it possible for them to produce that much

food?”

Even if the rumor spreads throughout the Kingdom, grain prices should only drop by a tiny bit at most considering the Kingdom’s large population.

“Oh, about that. According to some credible rumors, the Sorcerer Kingdom is using undead creatures to work large swathes of farmland; as a result, they saw a tremendous boost in their grain productivity. That way even such a small territory could match the entire Kingdom’s output. If you think about it, we’re talking about undead creatures that do not know fatigue. But. Well, if you think of that food being made by the undead it’s hard not to feel disgusted by it.”

“What? That’s just cheating!”

Philip couldn’t help but yell. The Sorcerer King could easily accomplish what he couldn’t get his subjects to do no matter how hard he tried. All the pain that he had to suffer through, the Sorcerer King deserved as well.

Or, perhaps he should also be using the undead for farming?

“That being said, it’s not like there’s nothing suspicious about it. After all, even if the undead worked tirelessly around the clock, for them to match the entire Kingdom’s output is… Still, their agricultural output is quite high, there’s no doubt about it. Right now, the Sorcerer Kingdom is sending food aid to the Holy Kingdom.”

“Food aid?”

“Mhm. Jaldabaoth, the Archfiend who brought chaos to our royal capital, appeared in the Holy Kingdom. It seems like his rampage caused some food scarcity issues and the Sorcerer Kingdom responded by sending the food bought from the Kingdom merchants as aid. A caravan with wagons full of grain passed through my territory the other day, so it has to be true.”

“How much can remain in the merchants’ warehouses if the food was used as aid to the Holy Kingdom?”

“That’s a fair point. Still, it’s a necessity to stockpile food in order to prepare for bad harvests. Plus, I don’t think the Sorcerer Kingdom used up all the grain they had bought as aid.”

That made sense. If Philip were the Sorcerer King, he would have also used the surplus food, which had been sitting in storage for quite a long time, as aid.

“Exactly. Well, bad harvests don’t happen that easily, right—”

“—That’s why it’s risky to wait for the climate to influence the situation. A better solution is required. For example, if the Sorcerer Kingdom’s grain supply suddenly disappeared, then the food produced in Philip-kakka’s demesne should

sell for a high price. That being said, you can't just do things like instigating a war with the sole objective of forcing the enemy to burn through their grain supply."

It was at this moment when an idea was formed spontaneously in Philip's head.

If the fact that grain does not sell for much even during bad harvests depended on the continued existence of the Sorcerer Kingdom's grain supply, what would happen if that were to disappear?

There was only one answer.

Grain prices would go up.

Next question: how could one make the Sorcerer Kingdom's stockpile of grain suddenly disappear?

The hint was in Wayne's words. The Sorcerer Kingdom's grain production must fall. But, this was not an easy task. After all, Philip couldn't just sneak into the Sorcerer Kingdom and burn all their fields, right?

What about stealing the grain?

The moment Philip thought of this solution, he felt as though a lightning bolt had struck his body.

To take a foreign country's property by force was, by common sense, an extremely dangerous action. Even without taking the consequences into account, Philip simply did not have the military strength to take on an entire country at this current moment. But, the Kingdom should see the Sorcerer Kingdom as its enemy. After all, a significant portion of its own citizens was killed in the war. It would be strange to not view them as enemies. If that's the case, wouldn't it be a brilliant move to steal from an enemy?

That way, Philip would be able to earn the support of the Kingdom's ruling class and perhaps there was even a chance he would be promoted to a higher rank in light of his contributions.

...Not bad. Isn't this a great idea?

As the cherry on top, he could also sell the grain that was taken from the Sorcerer Kingdom.

This is like killing three birds with one stone. A plan that was so perfect it could not be improved upon! But, how will I rob them of the grain? Should I discuss it with Hilma and hire mercenaries? No, that's no good. Mercenaries don't have a sense of honor. Only idiots would leave a trail behind that could be traced back to them and be used as blackmail material.

Following that logic, only his own soldiers could work. He'd call them soldiers but in actuality, they would just be a few armed villagers. He had considered forming a unit with trained soldiers instead of villagers who could only do farm work. Paying said soldiers with the grain that they would seize would be an excellent option.

But still, marching straight into the Sorcerer Kingdom's territories would be dangerous.

Philip's demesne was some distance away from the Sorcerer Kingdom so the cost of a marching army wasn't something that he could just shrug off.

No, wait, didn't he talk about some of the Sorcerer Kingdom's caravans passing through his lands? What if I attack those?

Was Philip alone enough to take on such large caravans? There was a limit to the number of villagers he could mobilize, but an overwhelming numerical superiority, enough to make the enemy surrender without any resistance, was absolutely necessary.

"Are you two free to have a chat? There's a matter that I would like to discuss with you all."

"We are, what's this 'thing'?"

"Mhm, it's something good."

Philip moved towards the pair and proudly began to explain his impeccable plan.

•

"What the hell, he should've said sorry at the very least." Wayne scoffed after saying goodbye to Philip.

The garment that was now stained with beer used to be his father's and was quite old in both texture and design, making it quite a rare item. He had originally planned to show up to formal social gatherings with that garment, but now he would have to make preparations all over again.

At the end of the day, the aristocracy was nothing more than a bunch of creatures whose eyes could not see past one's appearances. Clothing was naturally a part of the game, so what had just happened was absolutely unacceptable. But the truth was that Wayne was at the bottom of the upper-class society, so what good could have come from having some nice clothes?

On the contrary, this shabby garment could signify the owner's weakness, and was therefore very useful for someone who wishes to be under the protection of their superiors. An outfit like this was a must-have for him to play the role of a weak nobleman on the stage that is a salon. So until he takes on the role of another character, he was under its care.

That was why it was even more unbearable than usual to see it sullied.

"That is true."

A voice beside him chimed in, prompting Wayne to turn to look at its source.

"...Enough, that's enough."

His voice turned somber along with the atmosphere surrounding him. Had Philip stood witness to this change, he would have been shocked speechless.

Wayne was never the extroverted type, he just plain disliked conversing with other people. To do so he would have to create layers upon layers of facades as he desperately attempted to pretend he was the extroverted and effusive type.

"Sorry dude, I really can't handle that kind of a guise so you had to take care of most of it."

Igor had switched from his previous personality too; he now spoke in an unrefined manner using language that none of the nobility would dare to be caught speaking.

"No need, if you're really sorry, go practice a few of those pleasantries. Lower-level nobility like us have to put in real effort to appease those at the top."

"Life's just getting more and more difficult. I thought that once we inherited the barony we'd be able to join the racket of the aristocracy... Shameless flattery and ingratiation, just those two things alone annoy the shit out of me."

"Pffft, what are you talking about...? Peasants have to deal with the same shit. Never mind who has it worse, everybody who's working under somebody has to be a bootlicker of sorts."

"And that's why I never wanted to grow up... Man I miss the days when we were carefree enough to swing sticks around and pretend to be dragon slayers."

"There's no going back so don't think about it. Anyways, just learn to flatter others. That brainlet seems to be a good candidate to practice on, right? Even if we fuck it up our losses would be small."

To noblemen of the higher echelon or those with more experience in life, basically those who had seen it all, nothing could satisfy them unless it was made to perfection. That was why they had to gain experience every time they had a chance.

“For real...? Well, the next time we meet him I’ll try extra hard to put on a face.”

“Yeah, that’ll do, that’ll do. No one dislikes pleasantries. If someone you’re talking to is annoyed at you, it just means that your ability to hold a conversation isn’t there yet... Igor, I know this is hard. I’ll make up for your flaws and you can make up for mine, that was our deal, but you can’t just stop trying to overcome your own weaknesses because of that. It’s not like we’ll be with each other forever.”

Though Wayne might be more intelligent than the average person, he was completely outmatched in terms of athleticism. Igor was the complete opposite.

If they were of the same type, perhaps they would have been competitors instead. It was for this reason they were grateful for the fact that neither of them thought of each other that way. It was unusual for neighboring lords to be friendly with each other, but since they were the third and fourth sons of their family, they weren’t indoctrinated with animosity from the past. That was why they were so close.

Most importantly, they had chemistry.

“Is that so...? So, what about what we discussed with him?”

“Absolutely terrible.”

Wayne did not hesitate for a second before answering his friend’s question.

For someone like him to be at the helm of the faction was just far too dangerous of a situation.

“But, wasn’t that guy easily manipulated?”

“Mhm, that’s true.”

This faction was, frankly speaking, a garbage dump.

Its members were only in it to capitalize on their status as noblemen and had absolutely no interest in developing their lands. Like a child with an iron sword, they abused their windfall authority. They had accomplished nothing whatsoever yet were overconfident enough to believe they were omnipotent. These people were beyond saving. Even someone like Wayne could understand that he was just a completely ordinary nobleman, yet they couldn’t. The faction was full of that kind of people.

It was safe to say that because of this, the faction had a huge problem.

“The Sorcerer Kingdom storing grain in the capital is a disturbing development because they theoretically have complete control over its market price. They’ll definitely raise the prices due to our bad harvest this year. What’s

even more terrifying is the fact that the nobles who are optimistic about such a blatant trap and have switched their farmlands to only grow cash crops aren't the minority. Their mentality is that even if anything bad were to happen, they could get through a famine by importing grain from the Sorcerer Kingdom, even if the price is a bit higher."

A lot of landed nobles in this faction had this mentality. Despite his attempts to subtly hint at the perils of doing so, their attitudes clearly demonstrated their belief that they alone would not be affected by it. They were determined to put their plans into action.

"...We lost a great amount of our labor force in that war. It's easy to see that they're fixated on the short-term profits based off of how they're distributing their remaining work force alone."

To let go of petty gains and instead focus on long term profits should've been common sense for those at the top of the hierarchy.

"So to even think of robbing a Sorcerer Kingdom's caravan of grain is evidence that he's got brain damage. Surely no one is stupid enough to not understand that attacking a caravan that's flying the Sorcerer Kingdom's flag would be treated as a declaration of war and would result in serious retribution? Even if he's this — Hold up. Were we being deceived?"

It was certainly possible that they were being set up and he just couldn't figure out what that man's goal was. Perhaps it wasn't such a bad choice to accept his proposal after all.

"No, aren't you overthinking? It's probably because he was really that much of an idiot that he didn't consider the potential consequences at all while he was coming up with that plan."

"Hey now," Wayne smiled bitterly, "to not consider the consequences of attacking those wagons at all — can an idiot of that magnitude really exist?"

"Well... if you put it that way..."

At any rate, there was no plausible way that a noble without common sense would be chosen to inherit his family's title; hence, Philip must have had a goal. What could his goal be?

"It's best if we consult Cygnaeus, right?"

"—No, don't tell her."

Hilma Cygnaeus, the woman who did everything in her power to establish this faction.

It was rumored that she was a lover of a certain earl, but the formation of this

faction would not have benefited said earl in any shape or form. And so, the origin of her overly plentiful funds and wide connections remained a mystery.

It was probably an organization, not an individual, that was behind the woman. By the simple process of elimination, one could easily arrive at which organization would have had such capabilities.

The Eight Fingers.

The crime syndicate controlling the Kingdom's underground society.

In that case, Hilma was probably someone who could be readily discarded, like a mannequin.

No, Wayne's intuition told him.

His few conversations with her told him that she was definitely not some simple sacrificial pawn. In fact, it was more than likely that she was one of the higher-ups of the organization. To have someone like her embedded in the faction was worrying to say the least. Although some nobles had the power to covertly form pacts with the crime syndicate, Wayne did not want to get entangled with such illegal organizations himself.

It was precisely because they didn't think too highly of themselves that they would want to take advantage of her whilst maintaining a smooth operation.

"Why...? Looks like you're thinking about something that I won't be able to grasp again, but isn't it about time that you tell me what's going on? Even I know that saying yes to that guy will get us into trouble in the future. We're about to attack a Sorcerer Kingdom's caravan in your territory, you know? That bony bastard is definitely not gonna just let it slide. There's no way that that guy's not losing his head after this, and yours might not stay connected to your neck for long either."

Igor was completely correct, but Wayne had an idea; he had agreed to the proposal with a full understanding of the risks involved.

"Perhaps that is that idiot's plan, to make us his scapegoats and pocket the stolen goods for himself. How about we go along with his plan? We'll be patrolling our own territories and will just so happen to stumble upon a group of bandits, the group that was responsible for the attack on the Sorcerer Kingdom's caravan. After that, we'll kill them all. It's crucial that we alone are responsible for taking care of them."

If an individual's caravan were to be attacked, no victim would simply stand down after receiving the news that the perpetrators were killed. This holds true even on a national level. Retaliation would have been more than warranted. This

is why they must not leave behind any evidence of their involvement. Moreover, they had managed to make it easier for them to maintain their innocence by painting the narrative that they were simply taking care of an incident that had coincidentally occurred on their lands.

"How about that? Not a bad plan to gain favor with the Sorcerer Kingdom, right? Even if we are suspected of involvement, we can just say that we were attempting to help aid the caravan. We'll be fine as long as the perpetrators are all dead. You know what they say — dead men tell no tales."

"We're getting ahead of ourselves, but we do have to consider the possibility that there are priests who could resurrect the dead. You know what they also say? No lie slips by the priest."

"...Do you seriously believe that there are priests capable of resurrection in the Sorcerer Kingdom? In a country where the undead are said to proudly walk the streets, tormenting the living?"

"No, I guess?"

Wayne grinned as he concurred with Igor.

"Regardless of that man's goals, an attack on a Sorcerer Kingdom's caravan is beneficial to us no matter the outcome. It doesn't matter if the attack succeeds — which I don't think it will — or fails, because the Sorcerer Kingdom would be on high alert for further attacks in the future either way. They might stop storing grain with the Kingdom's merchants. That way, those idiots would get a wakeup call and start making plans with a more solid foundation. Also—" Wayne laughed mockingly, "that man will be done for no matter what."

"Is he worth all the hassle? For us to take all of these risks just for him?"

"Of course he's not worth it personally, but it's necessary to hinder Cygnaeus, the woman behind him, even if it's just by a little. She must be planning to use him to manipulate the faction and draw attention away from her, ultimately allowing her syndicate to operate in one form out in the open. If that weren't the case, it wouldn't make sense for them to invest so much money into the faction."

The Royal faction and the Noble faction had already lost much of their power. If one could freely manipulate this third faction of theirs, they would be able to wield a terrifying amount of authority. This meant that the Eight Fingers would be in charge of both the Kingdom's legal and illegal affairs.

"I would only be able to come up with temporary solutions for these things, but you've already thought this far ahead, huh?"

As Igor said, such an idea should be out of reach of the minds of nobles, let alone a lowly Baron. The truth is of course, not all barons are the same, some of them owned more land than nobles of a higher rank. Unfortunately for the two of them, their territories were of sizes befitting a Baron, so they were your average barons in the Kingdom.

All the nobles without connections in the Royal faction or the Noble faction wanted to do was to better develop their land. For this to happen, the Kingdom must also change for the better.

They had the idea not just because they were nobles, it was also borne of their own ambitions.

What they desired was to become wealthier and happier.

That's why they would exploit any beneficial opportunities to its maximum potential.

"But even if we switched to a better faction, we would have to rebuild our reputation and connections all over again, right?"

"Yeah, right."

They had joined the faction to obtain opportunities that would otherwise be unavailable to them had they joined a more well-established faction. However, they never expected the Eight Fingers to appoint such a cretin to its leadership position. It seemed as though joining this faction was a mistake.

"Speaking of which, would the Sorcerer Kingdom use this as an excuse to declare war on the Kingdom?"

Wayne thought about it for a moment and shook his head.

"Unlikely. The Sorcerer Kingdom is a nation with a single city, they lack the manpower to fully occupy the entire Kingdom. Even if they have a lot of undead, they're only suitable for simple manual labor anyways. They can't properly manage a country, so even if war was declared, they would only ask for land that is closest to them at most... It shouldn't be an issue for nobles like us whose land is far from the Sorcerer Kingdom. Now then—"

He raised up a clenched fist as he spoke and Igor mirrored his movements to give him a fist bump.

"Let's do this!"

"Yeah!"

2

Philip had finally reached his destination, a patch of road in Baron Delvin's demesne. He had led his soldiers on a march, starting from the previous day and camping overnight, to the location of the attack. According to his intel, the Sorcerer Kingdom's caravan would be passing through this place.

Philip was on horseback, looking down upon his lined-up soldiers.

They were soldiers, or more accurately villagers, under his command.

A total of fifty were gathered.

He had sent draft orders throughout his entire territory, but not many men responded to the call. The most common response was that they had already served the time they were obligated to.

The truth was, this heavily upset Philip.

The plan was devised for the future prosperity of their lands, for the good of everyone who lived there. There was also an abundance of potential spoils of war, which Philip had given thought to and proposed that it should be distributed to everybody. Still, no one came to help.

They were too foolish.

A bunch of ignoramuses who could not tell if something was beneficial to them or not. Nay, this was the exact reason why they had to be led and lorded over by a genius such as himself.

Despite trying so hard to convince himself otherwise, his anger towards those who did not understand him flared up. He had thought about forced conscriptions, but that would definitely enrage his old man, who already had a foot through death's door.

In the end, he paid them in advance with the money he had borrowed from Hilma.

After all of his hard work, he managed to gather fifty men, but these were either old geezers well past their prime, sick youths with frail bodies, or men with inflated egos who went around looking for fights in their villages and were generally fractious.

To put it bluntly, they were the nuisances of their village and none of them were worth the money. Even so, Philip felt an indescribable excitement basking in the gaze of his soldiers.

He had a hunch that a widely circulated heroic tale of his own was about to begin. No, it had already begun.

As his territory will inevitably expand, so too would his status grow. He would soon be joining the world's stage under brilliant limelight.

He was about to deliver the first blow to the Sorcerer Kingdom, a feat no one else could accomplish. As a ploy to contain the Sorcerer Kingdom, this would surely allow Philip to receive high praise from the royal family and a rank that was befitting of such an achievement. Perhaps he could even marry that beautiful princess—

"—So, milord, can we actually attack them?"

Philip, who had been basking in his dream, was jolted back to reality as if a bucket of cold water had just been dumped over him.

He returned to his senses and looked at the soldier who had asked the question.

The soldier was an ordinary man, around 30 years old. He wore disheveled clothes and, for some reason, was holding a wooden shovel. Even a club would have been better than a shovel, perhaps even some of the sticks lying around here would have worked as well. Philip wanted to say something about that, but the shovel was probably the result of his order to have them bring their own weapons.

Frankly, seeing that a few of the villagers were without even sticks gave Philip a bit of a headache. Apart from them, however, the group as a whole appeared as though they were some destitute bandits. Perhaps it could even fool their opponents into believing so.

The soldiers around them apparently agreed with the man's doubts, as everyone within sight turned their heads towards him as if to say "Yeah, I was thinking about the same thing."

"It'll be fine, this is a move to save the Kingdom."

"Uh, milord, we don't really get the whole Kingdom thing, it's too complicated

for us. We won't get tied up and 'ave our heads chopped off though, ye?" Another man asked, and soon the others started to echo along with their "yeah"s.

Philip was greatly surprised by the questions that demonstrated a complete lack of an understanding of justice.

—It's precisely because so many people like them exist, that someone talented like me has to lead them. Nobody obeyed my plans on farm management because these people could only think on a surface level...

"I said there would be no problems, are you all deaf?"

"...No, no we aren't."

The soldiers were not convinced, their spite was visible.

Maybe he should have executed someone as a warning to the others, but that would make it seem like he couldn't lead at all. He would lose his dignity if he couldn't get them to work despite knowing that there were risks involved.

As Philip panicked and knew not what to do, he heard the overpowering sound of horses' hooves stomping on the ground. He turned his head to see two horsemen galloping towards him. Their faces were both covered save for the eyes, but he still knew who they were.

The two stopped afar and waved at him.

Why didn't they come over here? Shouldn't they come towards me and not the other way round? Philip thought maybe they had something to say that must be kept secret.

"Hm, I guess I have to."

He could finally feel a bit better about himself by saying things in a pretentious manner and so changed his expression to a flippant one to match.

Philip moved towards them on horseback. He'd had some practice riding, so having a horse walk in a straight line was not a problem.

"Baron, how are your preparations coming along?"

The man's face was masked so it was hard to identify him, but judging from the voice and his build, the man could be deduced to be Baron Delvin, or Wayne.

His outfit, however, was nothing like that of a baron's.

The hide armor was a bit dirty and a sword hung by his waist. His horse looked bored and lifeless, like a farm horse instead of a warhorse. Next to him was Baron Rokerson, or Igor, who looked pretty much the same. Their appearances matched so well that even their horses looked similar.

Unlike Philip who had some financial backing, they must have been quite poor. Philip thought about the time when he had seen them wearing shabby

clothes and tried his best to hide the sense of superiority that was about to show on his face.

Well, now I can't show this pathetic duo that I'm irritated by my soldiers' low morale, can I? This is such a pain.

He, as someone of higher status, must show to those below him exactly what made him superior to them. Philip must act as a role model for society, and the inferior must follow Philip. That way, the world could run smoothly.

"Only the two of you? What about your men?"

"We have already prepared them, right?"

"Exactly, our soldiers will flank Philip-kakka's and form the Crane-Wing Formation."

"Oh! The Crane-Wing Formation!"

Even Philip knew about that formation. Deploying such a famous formation was quite a gratifying thing to do; it was as though he had become the protagonist of some tale.

"So, if things go south please scatter towards the left and right. The enemy won't scatter if we only go in one direction. Remember to spread as far apart as possible when retreating."

"I understand. It's fine, you don't need to remind—"

"—Wouldn't it be better to decide in advance who should go which way? A successful retreat can be difficult in the heat of battle. This applies to Philip-kakka as well. Which direction will you be retreating to?"

They spoke as though they had foreseen his defeat, this made Philip quite upset.

"So you're sure that I'll lose?"

"No, no, it's nothing like that, Philip-kakka. Have you heard of the tactic of feigning a retreat to exterminate all the pursuing enemies in one go?"

"—Ah, aha, yes I have."

Oh I see, Philip accepted their explanation, but since it would be unpleasant to admit his ignorance, he acted as though he had already known of the tactic.

"As I thought, you knew about it. Well there you have it, this is the strategy, one that includes a strategic retreat."

Well in that case... As Philip was getting ready to discuss which way to retreat to, he realized that an important piece of information was missing.

"Before I answer, I have a question. You two haven't told me about the size of your forces yet. How many men did you bring?"

"75 each."

Philip was so shocked that they could muster up more men than he could that the thought *with these numbers, escaping in any direction would be the same* never crossed his mind until later on. Philip rationalized that, since this was their demesne after all, it made sense that it wouldn't be as difficult for them to do so. If this were simply a matter of quantity, things would be much easier; the problem lied in their prior considerations. Philip estimates that he could have mustered at least twice the number of men had this been his demesne.

"...If we have this much manpower, doesn't it make more sense for us to attack all at the same time? After all, we have around 200 men here."

"Though that would be a viable option too, it wouldn't be the Crane-Wing Formation. For it to be a Crane-Wing Formation, Philip-kakka soldiers must advance first with our forces covering the side flanks."

"Ahh, so that's why!"

Right, that's why. He had managed to completely forget about it.

Wayne let out an audible sigh. Since his face was completely covered, no one could see his current expression.

"I'm glad you could understand. Now then, which direction should we retreat to?"

"Ah, yes. We'll retreat towards Igor-kakka's direction then."

"So towards the left flank, I understand. Then I'll request that you stick to the battle plan we had discussed before. Please also keep an eye out for archers, it's not so uncommon for horses to kill their riders in a stampede once they've been struck by arrows."

"As long as I have this armor, I'll be fine even if a horse stepped on me. This is a high-grade item that was crafted by a renowned blacksmith and enchanted by magic casters."

Philip's armor set was a gift from Hilma. The armor had been enchanted with magic that boosted its defense, allowing it to outclass the armor set that had been passed down as a family heirloom in his house. Though he had received this gift quite a while back, he had never had the chance to try it out yet. This will be the armor's debut.

That Baron over there certainly did not have something of such high quality. Philip tried his hardest to stop his sense of superiority from showing up in his voice.

"Even so, it's best to err on the side of caution. Everything would be for

naught if kakka were to be killed in the fray. This is the truth."

"That's correct, because Philip-kakka is our general."

"Even if you're donned with such excellent armor, there are still weak points where an arrow could strike. In addition, no matter how durable the armor is, it cannot defend against most spells. Please do not let down your guard because of the armor, after all, Philip-kakka is our general."

Their repeated warnings greatly annoyed Philip, but he understood where they were coming from. If a general were to be slain, then the battle would be over, that was common sense.

Knowing that these two saw him as their leader, Philip couldn't help but smile.

"Of course, I understand."

"...Also, where will Philip-kakka deploy our formations? It would be too dangerous to deploy on the road. I believe it would be best to stay back, that way we could rush to your aid if we have to retreat. It would help if you can tell us your position."

Umu, umu. Philip was in agreement.

When the general is in danger, it is the duty of his subordinates to rush to his aid. Though this was common sense, Philip was shocked that he wasn't the one to suggest this in the first place.

I would have noticed these things if this was the usual me... right now I'm just too excited. This is my first time organizing a battle of this scale.

Philip gulped slightly and took a deep breath.

"Wha—, what's wrong?"

"Ah, nothing. I was just trying to temper the fiery passion for this battle in my heart."

"...Oh, I see. Is that so...? Umm, then where would Philip-kakka like to wait for the caravan?"

"First of all—"

Philip took a look to his left and right.

The paved roads were quite wide, enough space for two carriages to pass through side-by-side. This road seemed to be a major source of income for Baron Delvin.

There were lush forests to the sides of the road but the closest spots to the road where bandits would usually hide, had been cleared completely down to just grass.

The forest was under human management, apparently to allow pigs to forage

the grounds for acorns and the like, so there was no need for them to be on alert for monsters or wild beasts.

If that's the case—

"We'll set up the ambush in the forest."

"I see. If that's the case, I know of a suitable spot. There's a patch of forest where twigs, weeds, and whatnot have already been cleared out, that could allow us to retreat on horseback. How do you feel about that?"

"Such a place exists?"

"Indeed. When Philip-kakka decided to launch the ambush in these lands we knew something like that was necessary, so we took the time to prepare that spot."

Philip had repeatedly chosen this patch of land for the ambush in their previous meetings. Though he had asked Wayne and Igor for their opinions, both of them deferred to Philip. It must have been quite troublesome for them to make preparations after that.

"Then I'm truly grateful to you."

"Nonsense, since you had to take on the risks of leading the first charge, what we did was just our fair share, right?"

"It's just as Wayne-kakka had surmised!"

The two led Philip to the site and it was just as they had described. There shouldn't be an issue for horses to gallop if the grounds were in this condition.

As he finished his discussion with the two, Philip simply walked back to his soldiers.

Philip couldn't stop sweating because of his full-plate armor, and because they were on uneven ground, his helmet could cause him to lose his balance and fall over easily.

"Whooo, whooo!"

Philip wheezed heavily as he took off his helmet to clip on below his waist. He took out a handkerchief and began to furiously wipe his forehead.

Philip felt like the armor was a failure. Even though an armor's defensive capabilities are its most important quality, mobility is equally as important. He seems to remember that there were enchantments that lighten armor, he'll have to ask for one of those in the future. Or perhaps an enchantment that prevents him from sweating while he's wearing the armor.

He should talk to Hilma about this the next time he's in the capital.

After making a mental note of that, he walked back to the site where he saw

his soldiers bored out of their minds doing nothing.

"Sorry for the wait."

"—Milord. Who is that man who's covered his face? His appearance screams bandit. Are we being set up?"

"That's impossible, that man's obviously an esteemed noble of the Kingdom. Speaking of appearance, don't mention it. It's not as though every nobleman could afford full-plate armor."

Plus, during the battle of the Katze Plains, those families that had lost their successors also lost many heirloom weapons and armor. Philip's household was in this exact situation, if he loses this set of armor it would be difficult to acquire one again.

Though it appears the soldiers do not believe in his reasoning, there was no need to force them to accept it.

"Okay! Let's wait till the caravan arrives! After it does, we'll attack it immediately!"

Philip heard no response and raised his voice.

"Do you understand?!!"

"Understood..."

Though everybody answered begrudgingly, their voices in unison were still loud enough to be heard.

Philip was unsatisfied with their response, but he'll have to leave it at that. This is their first battle after all, there was no need for them to meet all expectations.

For them to develop into excellent soldiers, they will have to focus on the most immediate problems at hand.

As Philip mulled over these thoughts, he sat on the ground as if his body was giving in to the desire for rest.

•

A vast criminal syndicate known as the Eight Fingers lurked in the shadows of the Kingdom.

There existed eight divisions within the syndicate, one of them being the smuggling division. Christopher Olsen, a member of said division, sported the face of an honest merchant. His words carried quite a bit of weight on the major

trade route connecting the royal capital to the west side of the Kingdom. As such, he'd had the first-hand experience of having his warehouses be looted clean of various types of goods during Jaldabaoth's rampage.

They had substantial losses but it did not spell the end for his company. Still, a considerable amount of time was now necessary to recover those losses, so he found it to be a necessity to borrow a portion of the funds from the Eight Fingers.

You've got to spend money to make money, that was how businesses operated. Of course, it could also lead to greater losses, but as long as he kept his head down and avoided unnecessary risks, there was not much to worry about.

Borrowing money from Eight Fingers, however, would start one down the gradual path towards losing oneself. The Eight Fingers would force merchants who had made losses into criminal activities such as smuggling, selling or transporting narcotics.

Merchants fell into this trap quite often.

So what about Christopher, who had already been ensnared?

In order to borrow money, he'd had a meeting with the leaders of the divisions, which shocked him, to say the least. Christopher belonged to the smuggling division, so the management of loans should have been done by his superiors in the same division. Meetings with the executives of the other divisions should have been an impossibility.

Despite all of this, he got to meet with the top brass. Was it because his accomplishments had earned him a high recommendation? Or was it some other reason unbeknownst to him? He couldn't figure out why even after the meeting had concluded. The only thing that he was certain of was his suspicions towards the divisions' leaders' unusually friendly attitude towards him, knowing full well how they were feared even by the dark side of society.

Of course, goodwill from mafia heads could just as easily be faked as anything else.

Another thing that caught his attention was the fact that they, befitting their status at the highest echelon of the organization, apparently took their own health quite seriously. While he wondered if they were perhaps a bit too skinny, they were definitely healthier compared to his overweight body.

Such people of importance had given him a job on the spot.

The kind of job to be given out depended on various factors, such as the

amount of money borrowed, the value of the person as a human being, and whether that person could be of use to Eight Fingers in the future. Those with better ratings were given safer jobs and vice versa.

The job given to him was—

"—Transportation of the Sorcerer Kingdom's grain, huh. Whether or not it's safe is still unclear, hm."

"Hm, what's the matter? Did you say something, sir?"

"Oh, don't mind me. I'm just mumbling to myself."

The one to respond to his question was the leader of the mercenary division.

He was a robust man.

Very much different from Christopher, who was in his forties and saved up a thick layer of fat around his waist. The man was young, sharp, and apparently only in his twenties.

He wore a steel chestplate with chainmail underneath. A helmet that could cover his entire face sat next to him, together with a well-worn sword.

The man was the leader in charge of protecting the Sorcerer Kingdom's grain caravan, which consisted of seven horse-drawn carriages and wagons.

The security detail consisted of 24 people in total, all of which were employed by Eight Fingers and like Christopher himself, belonged to the smuggling division.

Though they were members of the same department, they still charged for their service and at a rate higher than that of mercenaries of a similar level nonetheless. On the other hand, they no longer had to worry about information leakage for secret missions as they were more loyal to the mission at hand.

In the face of threats that couldn't be taken care of, regular mercenaries would probably just abandon the mission, but these men would fight as rearguards to their death. This was understandable, as abandoning the mission would cost the higher-ups their dignity; as a result, they would have been hunted down and murdered even if they were to make it out alive.

Therefore, for someone like Christopher who did not know of any trustworthy mercenaries, these men from the Eight Fingers were probably his best choice. But then again, for this mission, they were his only choice.

It was a direct order from the higher-ups to use these men.

To make up for the lack of options, they were to provide their services for free and so he had surplus funds to hire even more mercenaries. However, hiring extra mercenaries would be seen as a sign of distrust towards the men. Never

mind the fact that their employment was specified by the top brass, so hiring other mercenaries could be seen as him disobeying their orders.

After giving it some thought, Christopher decided against hiring extra mercenaries.

Moreover, all of the guards appeared to be quite capable, but of course, Christopher, who was no warrior, could not properly grasp their strength. That was not a problem however, as the higher-ups have vouched for them by claiming that they were outstanding. Going against orders would be dangerous regardless of the reason.

That being said, if he were to be asked whether he felt it was safe to depart with such a small detail, he would have wished for more capable men.

It would have been great if he could borrow a boss from the security department, a member of the Six Arms, the enforcement group of the Eight Fingers. Needless to say, that wish would never come true.

It was said that the Six Arms, including its leader Zero, who was said to be the strongest warrior in all of the Eight Fingers, was exterminated in a conflict with the royal family, just before the calamity caused by Jaldabaoth.

Credible intel attributed their defeat to Brain Unglaus, a warrior serving under the Golden Princess.

It would be outrageous to assume that all six of them were defeated by a single person, but apparently Blue Rose, an adamantite-ranked adventurer group, had joined the fight as well. Christopher deduced from this that it was most likely a six-vs-six battle.

The security department was said to have lost most of its members in the battle. At the moment, every department was building up a force of its own to compensate for the loss, to the point where even members of the assassination division began to operate out in the light.

Nevertheless, this managed to improve the mood of those within the Eight Fingers to the point where it was now better than it was before the appearance of Jaldabaoth.

Internal conflicts were rife in the past and it wasn't unlikely for one to fall victim to dirty tricks being played behind their backs. Some merchants were even reported to the authorities by people from the other departments during the most crucial stages of a smuggling mission.

At the moment, however, the higher-ups were being so cooperative with each other that it was almost disgusting to think of.

Business had expanded as a result and illegal profits from each endeavor grew too.

"Puhuuu-ahhh."

The mercenary leader farted audibly while yawning. It was an unavoidable physiological phenomenon, and he had no intention to apologize.

A disgraceful action.

Christopher frowned. That was the worst sound to wake up to from a daydream.

He honestly wanted to complain, but this man was to be his companion during the trip to and from Re-Lovell, a large port city on the west side of the Kingdom. His desire to maintain a friendly relationship with him suppressed his desire to complain.

Ships would be used to transport the cargo from Re-Lovell to the Holy Kingdom, so that would be the job of a certain maritime merchant. He was a great man and Christopher knew him well. It came as a surprise to him that the man was also a member of Eight Fingers, but he claimed they were collaborating solely for the mutual benefits.

Still, he couldn't help but worry.

"You seem relaxed. You don't think anyone's going to attack?"

"Hm? Oh, I haven't gotten that stinging feeling, so no prob— Oh, you probably wanted to say that feelings can't be trusted, eh? Well, I understand where you're coming from, but you surely have also had moments when you thought 'this will work out fine,' right? There are also times where you have had a bad feeling about something, so you try to plan for it, and it ended up being true, or something."

"...Yeah, I've had those experiences."

"See? Our past experiences can function as our intuition."

The mercenary leader spoke in a tone that didn't seem to match his appearances at all.

"See. Well, we're also flying the Sorcerer Kingdom's flag. Only ignorant villagers-turned-bandits would dare attack such a caravan, in which case, we can easily take care of even a hundred of them."

"What if it isn't villagers?"

"Are you worrying about down and out mercenaries? Would they not be able to recognize the flag of the Sorcerer Kingdom, the hottest of all topics?" he shrugged, "experienced mercenaries are surprisingly well-informed. Those who

don't even know of the flags of the countries around don't scare me at all. ...Looks like you're not buying it. Think about it, wouldn't it be worrying to not know which noble you're picking a fight with? You wouldn't want to get into trouble that way, would you?"

"That makes sense... I'm curious, which nobles are the riskiest to pick a fight with?"

"About that — for example the famous ones like Raeven and Boullope. The likes of them have strong armies stationed within their own territories and it'd be dangerous to bump into them. Well, they both suffered great losses in that war, so maybe they're not as dangerous as before... Still, shouldn't be careless. Blumrush pays well so I don't wanna get on his bad side... Well, I simply just don't want enmity from any of the noble lords."

"But you're being backed by a criminal syndicate. Are you being serious?"

"So are you, right? If I get into trouble with them, the big shots will just abandon me without a second thought. Same goes for you, yeah?"

"Yeah."

They fell silent and the mood began to feel a bit gloomy.

They were reminded of the ruthlessness of the top brass, but there was nothing they could do about it as people who were part of such an organization purely for the profits. Perhaps there was a way of life for him that did not require any connections to the organization, but that wouldn't have led to him becoming the great merchant that he is today. Perhaps he would still have had to stick to smaller business deals to this day.

The word "if" carried the connotation of an infinite number of possibilities, but without the means to travel back in time, one must be satisfied by the present.

"...Anyways, just don't worry, right? I get it. So what's the worst threat that we could face as of now?"

"If the enemy were to use flaming arrows to try and burn down the caravan — burn, not rob — that would mean that we're getting involved in some greater conspiracy — a national problem. Or a rival organization's ploy."

"An organization that could rival the Eight Fingers... Is that even possible?"

"Don't know. But even a rival group probably wouldn't want to burn the Sorcerer Kingdom's goods, unless they're confident that no clues would be left behind. Personally, I think national conspiracies or ploys from the Kingdom or other neighboring countries are far more concerning. We're probably under a

higher threat to receive an attack from those sources…”

“If that’s the case then there’s no point in worrying about it, huh.”

“Right? Anyways, it looks safe for now. Don’t worry, just sit tight.”

•

The caravan was soon approaching a forest.

They could utilize that fact to estimate their approximate location.

Christopher opened up a mental image of a map to confirm that they were indeed making good progress. He could finally relax. Messing up a job related to the Sorcerer Kingdom would invite some terrifying consequences.

The time was around noon. They just had to pass through this forest and then they could take a break as planned. This wasn’t a wild forest, it showed signs of being well maintained by men so it shouldn’t take too long for them to traverse through this place.

The sound of bolting horses could be heard within the wobbling carriage, which was when the carriage also started slowing down.

Christopher took a peek at the mercenary leader and found his aura to be completely different from just then, things were getting serious.

“Excuse me, but it looks like I have a job to do.”

Two men poked their head through the portière, subordinates of the mercenary leader.

“Sorry, boss! This guy said there are a lot of villagers hiding in the forests.”

The mercenary said as he turned to face Christopher. The one who he had referred to as “this guy” was their scout.

“…Not bandits, but villagers? How’d you know that?”

“Yes. First is their equipment. They were neither armored nor armed. Many of them are using hoes as improvised weapons… not clubs but hoes.”

“Even rocks could be weaponized… but hoes you say? That’s odd. No, were they metal hoes?”

“I couldn’t get a closer look but they appeared to be made out of wood.”

Christopher, who had been silently listening in to the conversation, thought that it must have just been regular villagers who were returning home after working on their farms.

“Hah? Really? Hoes? Is this a hoax…?”

“It didn’t feel like that was the case…”

“Send a few men to disperse them? Maybe we’re being too cautious…”

The mercenary leader mumbled.

The situation called for everyone to speak their minds, and that was probably why he was mumbling loud enough to himself for the others to hear. Probably.

“Excuse me, sorry for butting in on your conversation but can I say something?”

“Ah, that’s fine. As long as it’s constructive suggestions, we can never have too many of those.”

“First of all, this forest is well maintained — a cultivated forest, people let their pigs forage here or something. Aren’t they just here to round up their pigs? If that’s the case, if we were to disperse them, it might seem as though we are trying to steal their sounder of swine. We’re flying the Sorcerer Kingdom’s flag too, if a rumor was to circulate that the Sorcerer Kingdom is stealing pigs… wouldn’t it be bad if *that* country found out?”

“Tsss,” the mercenary leader sucked in his lips.

Up to this point they’d had their safety guaranteed by the flag. They had the right of way through some of the cities along the way and were treated with respect because of it, but now it seemed as though the grace of the Sorcerer Kingdom had turned into shackles instead. To bring shame upon the Sorcerer Kingdom would be to bring disaster upon themselves.

That was why Christopher did not dare bring along any contraband for sale later on.

“You said there were a lot of them, how many is ‘a lot’?”

“For a rough estimate… felt like there were around 50 men.”

“I think that’s too much manpower for simple farm work, what about you?”

He was the one to bring farm work up, but his parents were merchants too. Christopher had no experience raising pigs.

“No, no. I don’t know if that’s too many or too little. I have no idea how many people are necessary to catch a pig. Maybe they’re here to plant more trees, or even cut down some. I heard there were also some types of farm work that require pigs or something…”

Well, if they brought hoes, then *that* would be more likely.

“Then, what about the noble of this land? Any tales of him working his serfs to death?”

Christopher kneaded his thick neck as he replied.

“No, I had seen him once in the past. He’s pretty young but also highly reliable. His demesne has also been stable under his management. If he was to learn more about the etiquette of the aristocracy and political strategies, he would have a bright future ahead of himself.”

Though he didn’t know him well, they’d shared conversations back when Christopher supplied alcohol to some tavern in the capital that was being funded by the Eight Fingers.

It was unfortunate that Christopher had not been given a warrant of appointment, so he had never done business with that noble even when he had to pass through this section of road in his demesne before. The lord here had potential worthy of Christopher’s attention, in no way was he the type to mobilize villagers to attack caravans. From what Christopher could recall, there weren’t many villagers in that man’s demesne who were hungry enough to attack a trade caravan, never mind fifty of them.

There was a world of difference between him and the man introduced to Christopher by Hilma Cygnaeus. No, that man was simply unparalleled in his inferiority.

Christopher couldn’t help but suddenly tense up his forehead at the memory of being mistreated back then.

“Boss, even if they were to attack, they’re only fifty unarmed and unarmored villagers. We should be able to defeat them easily.”

“What are the chances that this is bait and there are more soldiers lying in wait for an ambush?”

The two mercenaries looked at each other upon hearing what their leader said.

“That’s possible. Should we scout out our surroundings? If so we’ll need some time.”

“Better safe than sorry, do it.”

“Please don’t take too long, if we deviate from the plans too much I would have to march an army of wagons through the next time around to make up for the time we lost.”

“Understood, just take a look around and return as soon as possible.”

The scout gave a nod and ran out.

After around ten minutes, he returned to report that other than the fifty, there did not seem to be more waiting in ambush.

They arrived at the conclusion that they must be there for farm work and continued on their way. Not even five minutes had passed before the carriage

stopped again.

"...Patron, I do apologize but can I trouble you to come out for a second? The villagers have blocked our path. If they had any malicious intentions we would have just rushed them to scare them off, but they seem to be indifferent, lethargic, or... they just don't look right. So I was hoping that you could come out and talk to them? Of course, your safety is our number one concern, so we prepared this shield for you."

To tell the truth, Christopher really wanted to decline the mercenary's request. He did not believe in his own abilities; after all, he had avoided any and all violent confrontations throughout his life.

But, this wasn't something he could ignore. If they were to be embroiled in a dispute over what happened today, it could cost Christopher his access to this road. In that case, it wouldn't just impact him but possibly also his children who will inherit his business.

"...Yeah, let's go."

Christopher and the mercenary leader stepped off the carriage together and walked towards the front of the entourage. They were escorted by mercenaries carrying a large shield known as a tower shield, which could cover half of his body during the negotiations.

Furthermore, they were also followed by halberdiers who were there as a deterrent and archers who hid in the forest. Of course, the mercenary leader was also there. He had warned Christopher to listen carefully to his commands should a situation arise.

Between the two sides of the forest on the road ahead of them, sat a few chattering villagers.

There was no mistaking it, they could only be villagers who were returning home after they had finished a day's worth of farm work.

But if that was the case, why did they stop in the middle of the road to block them?

Perhaps the mercenary leader had perceived Christopher's worries, as he started to mumble towards him in an attempt to initiate a conversation.

"Hey, pretty baffling right? If they're planning to jump us they should've split into two and hid in the forest or something. There are lots of ways to set up an ambush, but none of them would require you to show yourself in the middle of the road. No commander would be stupid enough to make such a mistake."

"Could it be that they're trying to scare us?"

"Scare us? With their equipment? With those numbers? Wouldn't that be a serious insult to us if that were the case? Has my patron only employed mercenaries of such low levels before?"

It was just as he had said.

Christopher did not bother replying but only stared towards the villagers. That said, the distance between them was huge and there were rows upon rows of mercenaries standing in front of them.

"I'm just a simple merchant who has accepted a transportation contract. If you're on the road to beg some noble or whatever, we do not want anything to do with that. Please vacate the road, otherwise we will be forced to bear arms against you all in the name of self-defense."

A man appeared from the forest just as he had finished speaking to the villagers.

The man had donned an exquisite set of full-plate armor, but because he wasn't wearing his helmet, Christopher could see his face.

It was someone Christopher had met before.

"Unfortunately, for the sake of the Kingdom's future, I cannot allow you to pass!"

"...Hah?"

Christopher couldn't stop himself from vocalizing. It wasn't just him either, the mercenaries around him had made similar sounds too.

"...I see. Looks like there has been some sort of a misunderstanding, we are just transporting the Sorcerer Kingdom's food aid to the Holy Kingdom."

"I mew it! —Ahem! I knew it! That's precisely why I'm doing this!"

What the fuck is this guy talking about? or rather, *what kind of thought process would lead you to that conclusion?*

Christopher was perplexed from the depths of his heart.

But wait—

It doesn't matter what this unpleasant fool thinks. I don't think his demesne is even close to this place? Why is he here? Are they in cahoots? But would the lord of this land even bother working with this guy?

Meh, whatever. Christopher thought. The man had admitted guilt already, now Christopher could report back to his superiors that they were delayed by fools who were standing in the Sorcerer Kingdom's way. It shouldn't even be a problem with the Kingdom or the Sorcerer Kingdom if they were to kill them all. Just as he was about to motion to the mercenaries around him to slaughter them,

he felt a strong feeling that he shouldn't.

The man they called Philip is a nobleman who has the backing of Hilma Cygnaeus. Christopher, who was humiliated and had to hide his anger beneath a fake smile back then, was told that though this man was moronic, he still had value, so it was best to just ignore his own humiliation.

Would it be such a good idea to kill a valuable pawn of the Eight Fingers?

Speaking from common sense, there'd be no way a local noble would attack a caravan that was flying the Sorcerer Kingdom's flag. Everyone should know that it would just invite the Sorcerer Kingdom's wrath and spark all-out war between the nations. No matter how dumb a noble may be, they certainly wouldn't do something so braindead.

If that was the case — what would his reason be to undertake such a task?

Plus, if he was trying to pretend to be a bandit, he would at least cover up his face. I can't understand his reasoning.

No matter how stupid someone could be, they should at least know that they should be concealing their identity in this situation. Since he was wearing that set of full-plate armor, it should've come with a helmet that could cover his entire face. If that was the case—

He wants us to see his face. He wants us to identify him as Philip? Why wou— Ah!

Christopher was suddenly reminded of the existence of illusion magic.

That's it! It's an illusion! Someone's trying to frame Philip so they faked his appearance. Maybe those villagers aren't villagers after all...

He had managed to deduce it perfectly.

Then—

"So, so you're saying, you're robbing us specifically because we're carrying the Sorcerer Kingdom's grain. Is that correct?"

"Oy, oy? Patron, what's wrong?"

The mercenary leader who had been standing beside him asked with a perplexed expression. That was to be expected. He had expected an order to kill, so Christopher must have appeared to him like a mad man.

"That's right! We'll be using these grains efficiently!"

The man, who was purportedly Philip, replied with pride.

He's talking like a retard... The man pretending to be him must also be thinking why he'd have to say something so dumb. But...

Could this be a pre-prepared script? But why?

Christopher's first thought was of the rival organizations the mercenary

leader had mentioned in their previous conversation, his next thought was of the leaders of the Eight Fingers.

If it was the former, they had to get away from this place immediately. The Eight Fingers handed out the most ruthless punishments for those who had betrayed them, followed by those who had failed a job they had given to them. If the former was the case, then their opponents must have enough numbers to defeat Christopher's security detail. But even if they're just wearing disguises or whatever, Christopher couldn't think of a reason why there would be shovel-wielding villagers.

Now that he thought about it, the latter felt more natural. If that was the case, then they're dealing with something truly troublesome, something extremely troublesome. This could imply that the leaders of the Eight Fingers were not as united as previously thought and were still attempting to sabotage each other. Or, was this the will of all of the leaders?

—Are we being thrown away? Are they trying to push the crime of killing Philip, a noble of the Kingdom, onto me? ...His actual body might have already been dealt with.

If that was the case, what would their next best move be?

"Hey, patron? What are we doing? Are you scared? You know that we can easily fight off someone like him, right? Though that noble-looking nutjob has some pretty impressive armor, he doesn't seem to have the skills to match."

The mercenary leader spoke in a hushed tone. This wasn't the time for that, he shouldn't be interrupting Christopher's thoughts.

"—Hold on. Just wait for a minute."

Their problem wasn't going away. If they were pushing the job to kill Philip onto him, why didn't they mention it before? Had they told Christopher in advance, he wouldn't have to worry as much. He would have just taken care of that man as if he was just a normal bandit.

So was their plan to make it out to be that a Sorcerer Kingdom's caravan had killed one of the Kingdom's nobles, and bring the nations to the brink of war? This thought made Christopher uncontrollably tilt his head.

As the situation stands, it was more like a merchant of the Kingdom killing one of its nobles in self-defense.

It would be hard to force a war on these conditions. Of course, Christopher, as someone who had deep connections to the criminal underworld, knew full well that many people wouldn't think twice about doing something as long as they had a reason prepared. There were also people who would kill for the

simplest slight, but it was hard to imagine a country being this impulsive.

...Then there's only one possibility left. The top brass had decided on this already, but the word never got to me, so it's just a misunderstanding. After all, there would be no way they thought that it was possible for them to kill us all right now and not have news of it spread all over the place.

Careless mistakes being made was a tale as old as time, so it wasn't as though that was an unreasonable assumption. What would be his best move from this point onward?

If he were to take independent actions, there was a chance that he would be "taken care of." If he wanted to avoid that kind of situation, he should have an excuse for himself at the very least — he should act in a way that makes it possible to shift responsibility to someone else.

Killing that Philip guy would be the worst option. Once he's dead we can't bring him back and it would probably anger Cygnaeus-sama. If that's the case...

"...Leave the cargo... leave this place. If we did that he wouldn't chase us, would he?"

"Hah?"

Christopher tried his best to ignore the perplexed sounds coming out of the mercenary leader's mouth.

"Of course! I do not intend to harm the merchants of the Kingdom!"

Even if it isn't directly, you're still harming me. Though those were his hate-filled thoughts, Christopher did not let it show on his face.

"Oy, oy, oy? Are you for real? Are you being serious right now? What's going on? What's happening? Are you under a spell? Or do you see an entire army I'm not seeing right now?"

"This is an order from your patron, prepare for a full retreat."

The mercenary leader rolled his eyes and got quiet for a moment. Perhaps he was considering the possibility that Christopher was under a spell, his own opinions, and his future. After a while, with an expression that said he couldn't accept any of this, he said, "I understand."

The mercenaries covered for Christopher as they backed away.

He was allowing the grain to be taken away, but he knew the exact quantity and what exactly was in the cargo. If worse comes to worst, he could always re-purchase the cargo and send it to the Holy Kingdom. They wouldn't be so picky as to only want this exact caravan of grain, right?

Though he would have to apologize to the maritime merchant who was

waiting on him, it was imperative for him to return to the capital to ask Cygnaeus-sama about this.

Christopher knew from the depth of his heart that there was no easy way out of this situation.

•

Was it because the merchants knew which side was in the right? They backed off without even unsheathing their swords.

There were numerous wagons as their spoils of war.

He had taken a look inside, they were all filled with barrels and crates, each filled to the brim with grain. Though it was all the types of grain that was easy to store and were by no means fresh, they should be safe for consumption.

It was disappointing how it was just food.

Philip wanted to take something as a trophy to commemorate his great achievement, but grain couldn't fulfill that purpose.

If only there were sets of armor or swords in here, I could take one as a souvenir... so I really should have asked those men to leave their weapons behind, huh?

Philip looked over the cargo wagons that were his prize.

The horses had been taken away already so they did not have a way to move them. Of course, Philip had ordered them to leave the horses, but someone who looked like he led the mercenary group had refused his order.

He even shot an arrow into the tree next to Philip back then.

Though Philip hated his guts, he had no other option but to back down.

I have my full plate armor so I should be fine, but these soldiers aren't in the same boat as I am. Ah, how merciful am I to forfeit my own gains out of consideration for these people. Though, considering how everything had gone so well — not a single injury and not a single drop of blood spilt — I wanted to keep that up till the end.

Philip surveyed his spoils and his gaze fell upon the flag of the Sorcerer Kingdom.

Oh, I can keep this as a souvenir. The first to capture the flag of the Sorcerer Kingdom, the country that had defeated the Kingdom's 200,000 strong army in battle, is me!

Umu umu, umu umu, Philp nodded his head.

Though he wanted to hide his joy, he couldn't help but smile.

A perfect conclusion suited him the best — as he thought, he was truly someone with exceptional abilities. This made him extremely happy.

In front of him were the excellent fruits of his labor.

Since there were multiple flags around, it should be fine if he did it to one of them right? After finishing that thought, Philip dropped the flag and began to stomp on it.

The image of the Sorcerer Kingdom's flag being trampled in the dirt filled his heart with excitement. This wasn't something anyone else in the Kingdom could accomplish.

That's right, Philip had accomplished what no other man could.

Look at that! I'm not a good-for-nothing after all! Compared to my brother, compared to my father — compared to everyone else in the Kingdom! I'm truly the greatest!

"Ah, umm, my lord. Can we really take these? Or is it better to leave 'em where they stand?"

One of the villagers checking the wagons asked timidly. With his excitement curbed, Philip asked without masking his emotions, "...What are you talking about?"

"No, you see, umm, won't those who ran away come back 'ere with soldiers?"

"What do you mean? You think it would be better if we killed those merchants?"

"N-no! I didn't mean that! Killing them would 'ave been unnecessary."

"Then what are you trying to say?"

"Umm, my lord. What should we do about these? If we can take them back, how do we do that?"

The other villagers chimed in, it was what was bothering Philip as well.

"What should we do..."

Even if he forced all fifty of them to carry it back all on their backs, it still wouldn't be enough to move all of their spoils back. The carriages themselves were also of high quality so they could probably fetch a fair price, or Philip could just use them.

But, with the manpower he has on hand, moving these back wouldn't be an easy task — it would be heavy, grueling physical labor.

Right as Philip was agonizing over the matter, he heard the sound of people running on grass. Upon looking at the source of the sound, he saw the silhouettes of two masked men.

"Philip-kakka!"

It was Wayne's voice, but his equipment looked completely different from before. The dirty leather armor he had on was now replaced by a sturdy chestplate, he had a sword by his waist too. Why would he change his equipment? Philip felt doubt in his heart, but the feeling of excitement over the result of this operation was much stronger and thus overrode it.

"Hey! You two! Come, over here — look at our haul!"

"This... what, what happened?"

Wayne stood still, surveyed his surroundings, and spoke with an incredulous tone as if the cargo wagons being there was a strange sight to behold. Outside of regular combat and raids — once he considered that, Philip understood what questions Wayne had in mind.

As if to affirm Philip's thoughts, Igor opened his mouth to ask.

"...Exactly. Looks like none of Philip-kakka's soldiers have been harmed. The ground looks fine — the air looks fine, not even a whiff of blood. What kind of tactic did you employ? Did you have on your person any special magical items?"

If only he had any arcane talents, but that wasn't what Igor was talking about was he?

"None of that, after all I've gathered a great number of men, the enemy simply did not want to fight to their deaths. I think."

The two of them turned to face each other, but because both of them had their faces obscured, he couldn't see what their expressions were like.

"Now then — how should we split this?"

If he was being honest, the spoils of war in front of them were there entirely because of Philip's actions. It did irritate him somewhat that he had to split the prize with two people who had just been standing far back as spectators. However, if Philip were to take it all for himself, they would surely be unhappy too. After all, they also had to mobilize the villagers in their demesnes. Eighty percent of the spoils should go to Philip, those two can take the rest of it.

To take a tenth of the spoils each just for mobilizing some villagers, there'd be no way they would want more, right?

"Ah, no need to worry about that. It doesn't sit right with us if we were to take a portion of the spoils without doing anything at all. Please, Philip-kakka, you should take it all. I trust that there aren't any objections?"

"That's right, Philip-kakka should take it all, including the cargo wagons."

Even someone like Philip would feel guilty to take it all after hearing such

cordial words. Though they did say their villages were too small so Philip couldn't stay there, the fact that they had set up camps near the forest and had prepared food for him meant that those favors must be repaid.

"Nonsense, nonsense. Aren't we partners? I would have to leave some of the spoils behind anyways, please feel free to use them."

"No no, we have more than enough, Philip-kakka."

Wayne replied without hesitation, not a single shred of doubt was present in his answer.

"These were all earned through Philip-kakka's efforts. As the etiquette of the nobility would dictate, we cannot accept these."

"Is that true?"

"Yes," both of them answered simultaneously. They seemed to possess an unyielding will on this matter, so there was nothing he could do about it. *This is all mine!* Philip's heart fluttered at that thought.

"Since it has come down to this, I'll take it all. Also — though I'm embarrassed to ask, I do have a request for you two. Could I borrow some horses to pull these wagons?"

"Horses?"

"...What should we do?"

"We'll discuss this privately for a second, please excuse us."

The two who had temporarily left his presence seemed to be exchanging their opinions, but from this distance it was hard to tell if they were talking at all. They seemed to reach an agreement after a while and promptly returned to Philip.

"We'll prepare the horses as soon as possible. However, because these aren't warhorses but workhorses, could you return them shortly after you're done with them?"

"Thank you very much."

"Umm, an important thing to note, it would probably be best to lower the flags of the Sorcerer Kingdom. You wouldn't want to be seen by regular folks while transporting your spoils back, so though it will be difficult, please consider transporting them through the forest."

"Understood, I'll do that then."

The two strode away as soon as they were done talking.

Soon their silhouettes could no longer be seen in the forest. Philip surveyed the cargo wagons again.

This was proof of his victory.

They were as bright as his future.

On the other hand, that which now rests underneath Philip's foot, the dirt ridden flag of the Sorcerer Kingdom, was a representation of that country's eventual downfall.

3

Ainz strode proudly through the streets of E-Rantel.

Momon walked alongside him.

Needless to say, it was actually Pandora's Actor.

To match Momon's appearance, he had been equipped with a set of full-plate armor and two greatswords which hung on his back.

His regal and austere gait had garnered him much praise and prestige. In fact, his version of Momon appeared to be even more heroic than Ainz's.

To be honest, Ainz had considered asking him to adopt a worse gait in case the citizens were able to tell the difference between the different versions.

Of course, this wasn't something he would actually say out loud, so he figured he could at the very least attempt to secretly copy his gait. To this end, he had been stealing glances at Pandora's Actor from his side view and fortunately, he hadn't appeared to have noticed yet.

The one silently tailing those two to keep an eye out on their rear was Nabe — Narberal Gamma. Though it appeared that they did not have any bodyguards, in actuality, multiple Hanzos were hidden around them and were on alert; consequently Nabe, whose level was lower than theirs, was largely redundant.

However, considering how she had acted in this manner ever since she first debuted as Momon's companion, Ainz felt it was unnecessary to order her to stop.

It's important to note that these three were walking through the streets of this city without any goals in mind at all.

It was just a familiar exercise for all.

Through this procession with Momon and Nabe, Ainz was able to demonstrate various different things to the crowd. It was also for this reason

that Ainz hadn't brought the maids along.

This act served multiple purposes, the most important of all was to validate the fact that Ainz was still working together with Momon, so it wouldn't be appropriate to exclude Narberal from this operation. After all, Momon was always seen in full-plate armor and his appearance wasn't known to many. So, had they not brought Narberal along, rumors would begin to circulate that, "Momon was already killed by the Sorcerer King and it's actually an undead in that armor." In fact, those rumors had already begun circulating, so it was crucial for them to avoid creating further misunderstandings.

The pedestrians all kept to the sides of the road as if it was a no man's land upon spotting the trio's silhouettes.

This was of course, mainly due to the Sorcerer King's presence. If Ainz had walked down these streets as Momon, this wouldn't have happened. Though much time had passed between the founding of the Sorcerer Kingdom and now, the citizens were still terrified of Ainz.

It wasn't just the humans who were reacting to him in that manner, but also some of the demi-humans too.

This was because E-Rantel, which used to be a purely human-inhabited city, was no longer so. Demi-humans could be seen sprinkled throughout the crowds.

If one were to look around where they were, they would see the outlines of a number of demi-humans (although not many) in the shops. They were both employees and customers, and sometimes they were even the owners of the store.

The part of the city which used to be a pauper's district was renovated into residential zones for demi-humans under Ainz's orders. If they had been in that part of the city, this wouldn't be such an unusual sight to behold, but Ainz and the others were walking through one of the main streets of E-Rantel, far away from the slums of yore.

It was easy to see from this fact alone how there had been a considerable number of demi-humans flowing in and out of E-Rantel.

Though this wasn't due to any special policies Ainz had put in place, after all the one who had been putting effort into these matters was Albedo, he still felt proud of this fact. It told him that his plans to unify the races were progressing at a steady pace.

If this was the case, I would really like to enact policies that could speed up the process of uniting them all...

In fact, he had such a plan in mind already. Ainz had considered holding some sort of an event in E-Rantel with the ulterior motive to draw in more tourists and increase their income from foreign sources. What he hadn't considered was how unfestive and non-participatory this world was in general, which was the cause of his boredom this entire time.

Though a gladiatorial arena like the one in the Empire wouldn't be too bad, Ainz wanted something that hadn't been done already, something truly special.

If he were to hold a large event that involved audience participation or anything that would allow an interracial team to shine, that would surely boost racial unity. If people had something in common to talk about, surely it would be easier for them to get along.

How about some kind of ball-based sport like baseball or football? Or should I do something to spice up an existing event...

As he mulled over those issues, Ainz was also observing an Orc shopkeeper who appeared to be in a serious discussion with their human customers.

They were probably part of the Orcs he had encountered in the Holy Kingdom, the ones who had been devastated by the Evil Lord of Wrath and were then unified under Ainz. He couldn't recall any other time he had brought Orcs to E-Rantel.

Who this Orc was exactly, Ainz had no clue. Though he had incorporated a large number of Orcs into his dominion, the main reason was because Ainz, as one with human sensibilities, could not tell Orcs apart at all.

In a similar vein, he couldn't tell apart members of the other races either. For example, female Zerns differentiated themselves by their color. Speaking of Zerns, he couldn't help but wonder, how do they "see" anyways? In any case, they all looked about the same to Ainz.

This issue was applicable to most people anyways.

It was equally as difficult for an Orc to differentiate between two humans as it was for a human to differentiate between two Orcs.

For this reason, they had stuck to recognizing humans through features like hair length, pupil colors, et cetera, but incidents still arose whereby goods reserved for a specific person were sold to someone who looked similar, even though to someone like Ainz the two persons looked completely different.

The Sorcerer Kingdom had no issues with public order. Crime rates for misdemeanors were low, never mind felonies. This however, wasn't due to the strict enforcement of the law, but rather out of people's fears that their corpses

would be turned undead to serve the country after their deaths.

It was for this reason that misunderstandings were cleared up quickly and without much fuss, mountains weren't being made out of molehills. This was why the Orc was calmly discussing business with his human customers.

"The Adventurer's guild has also started accepting demi-humans amongst their ranks. I believe that all of the demi-humans will be able to reach their potential in the foreseeable future."

Ainz said under his breath without much thought, prompting Pandora's Actor to reply,

"Ainz-sama, it is exactly as you have surmised. Those demi-humans, upon witnessing the undead Ainz-sama had created, must have thought that the career of a common soldier was no longer feasible. Those with talents in the arts, manufacturing, and research would then be more inclined to utilize said talents to their maximum potential."

The Sorcerer Kingdom was still following the system of, "your race is pretty good at this, so you should probably seek employment in this field." However, as the citizens' knowledge of the other races and their respective cultures increases, they would probably begin to desire various other professions. Though this change was still in its early phases, the desire for self-determination would surely blossom over time.

The main drive for this change was the fact that all menial labor was now handled by the undead.

"Albedo seems to be managing that sector of the country well. After all, it's imperative for us to halt the development of problematic crafts."

Ainz and the rest were already at their level caps, so it was necessary to plan against those who were weaker than them and thus had the potential to become stronger.

As part of those plans, they couldn't allow their own people to achieve superiority in expertise over them. Weaklings should remain weaklings.

At the same time, they had to ensure that the supremacy of their country as a whole was well maintained against their neighboring countries. Perhaps Albedo was the only one who could possibly maintain this delicate balance.

To this end, we're in desperate need of spies capable of obtaining top-secret intel from our neighbors... We're still too weak on that front.

To create a POP monster that Nazarick would not automatically respawn required two ingredients. One was the monster's data and the other was the

corresponding amount of gold coins from *Yggdrasil*.

Though the library of Nazarick contained data on various types of monsters, it did not contain the data of every single type of monster from *Yggdrasil*. Some monster's data were of limited use too. For example, they had already exhausted their supply of data on Hanzos and the library did not contain any data for the creation of Eight-Edge Assassins.

The creation of higher-tiered monsters incurred the cost of a large sum of gold.

If that was the case, shouldn't weaker monsters suffice? Though he wanted to say so, actually using them would mean that there would be a higher chance of them getting caught whenever they tried to infiltrate someplace.

Amongst the surrounding nations, it wasn't inconceivable to think that they weren't the only ones capable of employing monsters. It would be best for them to use higher-tiered monsters who were harder for others to detect while their country was still of modest size. Or maybe—

"—Human spies?"

Ainz accidentally spoke his thoughts out loud. Nabe, upon hearing him speak, walked closer behind him to say,

"Ainz-sama. Speaking of which, how has the training for those spies been going? Shall I make sure those sows know who their rightful master is?"[5]

Ainz lowered his voice and responded with,

"...Nabe. You're the partner of the folk hero Momon now, do not forget your position."

After all, they had made it out to be that Momon and Nabe had been bound to this city out of concern for the safety of its inhabitants, which was why they were working with Ainz Ooal Gown in the first place.

Perhaps enough time had passed that it wouldn't be too bad to have their characters have a change of heart so that they were staying in the city out of reverence for the Sorcerer King instead. That being said, it would be safer to discuss this matter in advance with Albedo and the others to formulate a better script before committing to anything. Until then, it was best to not make suggestions to Ainz directly. It was better to discuss these matters within Nazarick and avoid those topics entirely while outside.

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5. Maruyama botched the idiom "唾をつけつけ", meaning "lay claim to." Literally translates to "put your spit on something."

"—I profusely apologize."

"You have been forgiven," would have been what he would have said, until he took a good look at their surroundings.

A lot of people were watching intently with horrified expressions, hopefully they hadn't heard what Nabe had said. Ultimately it wouldn't have been feasible for him to kill them all out of the suspicion of what they might have overheard, otherwise the facade he had built up that he was "a unique undead capable of speech who was different from the other members of his kind" would be harder to maintain.

Nonetheless, ignoring Nabe's question and causing her to put on a dismayed expression caused Ainz to feel pity for her.

It would be troublesome if she were to stop asking questions of her own entirely. With that in mind, Ainz muttered his answer in a volume that was incomprehensible to those around them,

"...We've lent out the Hanzos. Tira[6] is currently in charge of training the human spies, but if I'm being honest, all of them combined are no better than a single Eight-Edge Assassin... hmmm, just consider it an investment for the future."

Though it was unlikely that they would receive a return on investment proportional to the gold and time they had invested into this program, it wasn't as though it was completely impossible. The same applied to their investments in runecraft and other magical technologies.

They were going in completely blind on whether or not those efforts would bear fruit, so it would be best to dial back their investments down to a minimum for now.

Ainz stopped talking.

And just like that, the trio continued to walk down the street in silence.

Occasionally they would bump into patrol teams consisting of Death Knights, Death Wizards, Death Warriors, Death Priests, and Death Assassins. Though they were walking on the streets too, they maintained a tight formation with the Death Assassins silently keeping a lookout on the front. This wasn't due to any perceivable dangers, but rather the fact that they were just following their original orders to patrol in formation.

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6. Tira is the triplet sister of Tia and Tina and the leader of the Ijaniya assassin's guild, which was assimilated into the Sorcerer Kingdom.

Something of note was that though Death Assassins were bad at concealing themselves, they had a high damage output thanks to their high critical strike chance. If an enemy were to let their guard down because they believed that a Death Assassin did not pose a threat to them, then they would be able to deal an alarming amount of damage. This was why Ainz couldn't make spies out of them.

Even though we're exporting undead, those exports mostly consisted of weak Skeletons...

Of course, they were charging vastly different prices for weaker undead compared to the stronger ones, so the most popular product was still those designed for cheap menial labor.

Consequently, the amount of undead around the level of a Death Knight they had exported was minimal.

It would be a waste to not use up his daily limit of [Create Undead], so Ainz had been exhausting his daily-use abilities; as a result, the number of undead he had created had already become a nuisance to him.

If I were to lower their rental costs and raise them in the future, no one would rent from us again. Plus I don't want to cut prices directly... Should I create a rewards system? The Empire rented quite a lot of Death Cavaliers from us, so we should probably focus on marketing to nations directly... but...

Ainz glanced at Pandora's Actor, who was beside him.

It's kind of awkward to just walk like this in silence. But, there's not really much I'd want to talk to him about.

If people were to perceive that their relationship wasn't so great after all, then there wouldn't be a point to this exercise.

"Ah — miss Nabe."

A conversation with Pandora's Actor would be insufferable, so Ainz chose to speak to Nabe instead.

"Yes!"

Hold up, you don't have to answer with such vigor, you know? Ainz thought but did not bother to say out loud. Her actions weren't so strange in hindsight; when all was said and done, they were essentially subordinates under Ainz.

"Umm, how should I say this. How's Yuri's orphanage? Have you visited yet?"

"No, I haven't been there yet."

And that was the end of their conversation.

That couldn't be because she had a bad relationship with Yuri, but just that she had no interest in that matter, right? Wait a second—

—Would someone really be so disinterested in the workplace of someone whose existence was their closest analogue to family? But, that response was also to be expected from Narberal.

Would she have reacted in the same way if the question had been about Shizu or Entoma's workplace? Ainz shrugged as that thought came up.

"Shall we visit it then?"

Because the full responsibility for the orphanage had been given to Yuri, not even Ainz knew of its current status. Of course, he had been given detailed plans about it, but no memory of it remained in Ainz's vacuous, boney head.

There should've also been some scheduled reports on the finances of the orphanage, but since Ainz had been delegating those responsibilities to Albedo, he had only pretended to have read those reports.

Though he had advocated for Talent scouting through the education sector, the Sorcerer Kingdom had yet to implement the as of now unrealistic policy of universal education for all.

If the level of education rose, so will technological and cultural advancements, but it could also strengthen weaklings. Though their current policies may lead to some people with undiscovered Talents to stay as farmers for the rest of their lives, Nazarick's peace was their top priority.

"I don't think that's a bad idea."

After Pandora's Actor agreed, the trio began walking in another direction led by Narberal.

Not even two minutes had passed before Ainz received a [Message].

"「—Ainz-sama.」"

"—Entoma? What's going on?"

Ainz walked as he talked and felt rather inauspicious.

He couldn't remember the last time he had received a [Message] like this in the past year, so it must have been some kind of emergency.

But — Ainz's fearless smile never wavered.

The whole ordeal in the Holy Kingdom was such a pain that nothing could be worse in comparison.

Compared to the hell I had to go through, nothing this world could throw at me is undoable!

The request, as he had expected, was for him to return to Nazarick immediately. After replying that he would do so, Ainz instructed Narberal to bring the rest of the maids back to Nazarick too. He opened up a [Gate] after

bidding his farewells to the two to allow the Hanzos who had been securing their perimeter to go back.

Only then did Ainz return to Nazarick himself.

After dismissing the Hanzos, he took the Ring of Ainz Ooal Gown from Solution, who had welcomed him back. Using the ring, he teleported to the Tenth Floor and began to walk towards the room that was his destination.

The rooms that were either important or special in Nazarick had all been marked so that one could teleport straight to their doors with the ring. This was not the case with rooms that had been deemed as "normal" from the start and thus one could not teleport straight to them.

This could be seen as the only flaw of the ring that allowed its user to teleport freely within Nazarick but it was no longer possible for them to modify its functions. If they still had the *Yggdrasil* creator kits around it could be possible, but neither Ainz nor Nazarick's inventory had any.

Albedo stood in front of the door to Ainz's destination, awaiting his arrival. Ainz did not probe how long she had been waiting there, but only about the progress she had made on her assigned tasks.

"—You've been working hard, thank you."

"I'm not worthy of your praise!"

Ainz sighed on the inside as he witnessed Albedo deeply lowering her head.

Though he had said that he would return immediately, he had not given them a specific time frame. The thought that he could have wasted Albedo's time by making her wait unsettled Ainz. He did not and could not let those thoughts show on his face.

This had happened several times before. Despite telling Albedo that there was no need for her to wait for him each time, she had always insisted, saying that it was natural for a servant to welcome her master's return.

In fact, he had talked about this with not just the Floor Guardians, but the Area Guardians and the maids too. Every time he brought it up, their responses would be the same as the one Albedo was giving him right now. The maids were especially enthusiastic with their answers, demonstrating a level of determination that could even make someone like Ainz cower and apologize.

If this was the general consensus then Ainz, as their overlord, had to forgo his personal opinions on the matter.

Albedo opened the door to the room and welcomed Ainz in.

Ainz believed that he was not a man outstanding enough to be worthy of such

treatment and with great guilt, he put on the facade that this was all to be expected and walked into the room before her.

Shalltear.

Cocytus.

Aura and Mare.

And Demiurge.

The Floor Guardians had already been gathered in this room and were all bowing towards the throne that somehow radiated darkness.

Behind the throne hung the flag of the Sorcerer Kingdom of Ainz Ooal Gown.

It looked like everybody who was supposed to be here was already here. In cases such as this where all hands were on deck, Ainz had to be the last one to arrive according to procedures. Unless it was for a special occasion, no one would arrive later than him.

Ainz surveyed the overburdened Guardians in front of him.

Every Floor Guardian had been entrusted with their own set of duties in the past, but recently the scope of their work had increased by a wide margin.

The air transportation system that mainly relied on flying monsters (mostly Dragons) had established a transportation network between the Sorcerer Kingdom, the Empire, the Dwarven Kingdom, and the desolate, demi-human-inhabited region to the east of the Holy Kingdom. The one who was placed in charge of this network, Shalltear, now had the responsibility to utilize her skills to gradually establish a land-based transportation network.

The one in charge of controlling the weather in the territories and building an underground tomb on the outskirts of E-Rantel, Mare, was also working alongside the newly established Adventurer's Guild.

The one in charge of commanding, managing, and training the Sorcerer Kingdom's army, which consisted mostly of the undead but also included various types of demi-humans and a small number of humans, was Cocytus.

The one who used to only have to command her own magical beasts but now had to operate a department which deployed a warning net that provided adequate coverage over the ever-increasing boundaries of the Sorcerer Kingdom's territories, was Aura.

The one who was establishing an intelligence agency on the Seventh Floor of Nazarick, was Demiurge.

Just like that, the responsibilities of each Floor Guardian grew over time.

Which was why there were plans to shift some of those responsibilities to

those who up till that point had only been concerned with the internal defense of Nazarick, the Area Guardians.

Needless to say, the one who was in charge of checking up on everybody's progress, receiving requests or suggestions, and approving the various affairs of the Sorcerer Kingdom, the Guardian Overseer Albedo, had been the busiest of them all.

The truth was, no one was as idle as Ainz.

His daily duties amounted to simply practicing acting more like an overlord, it was a deeply embarrassing fact to admit.

So basically, he had been summoned for something that those who were occupied by the most important tasks had deemed to require his presence.

Ainz strode in a dignified manner through the center of the room. Albedo shut the doors behind them and followed closely behind him.

He sat on the only seat in the room. Albedo took a knee in front of him and said,

"Ainz-sama. The Floor Guardians of every Floor have arrived."

What do you mean, they have arrived? They were here already! Of course, Ainz did not and could not say that out loud.

"—Umu. You Floor Guardians have been working hard. Raise your heads."

"Yes!"

The guardians raised their heads as they gave their crisp answers, an action that was both flawless and in unison.

Originally, Albedo had been the one to ask them to raise their heads but Ainz had decided to put an end to that. Though it had been said that a superior shouldn't talk so easily to their subordinates, Ainz did not want to distance himself from them that much.

The guardians' gaze, which made apparent their absolute loyalty, all fell on Ainz's body. In the past, Ainz couldn't handle this kind of attention, but his skin had grown thick in the intervening times to the point that it did not affect him in the slightest these days.

But... why? Am I getting the wrong impression or do they feel even more loyal than they were before...? No... it has to be the wrong impression, right...?

Ainz, who couldn't recall doing anything that could have raised their loyalty, avoided the welcoming gazes of the guardians to randomly scan the room he was in. This wasn't because he couldn't handle their gazes, but he did it anyway.

On both sides of the room were doors that were dissimilar to the one they had

just walked through, doors that were not warranted given the relatively small size of the room. The room was just decorated in such an exquisite manner that it emanated an air of grandeur.

It was set up to be the audience room within Nazarick. Another was set up in E-Rantel.

Nazarick's throne room was glorious, but it was too spacious and would feel empty if not enough people were gathered inside. He could gather enough people if he wanted to, but considering problems such as the presence of a World Class Item, something that was among Nazarick's strongest assets and thus could not casually be seen by others, an audience room was built.

Everything in Nazarick was made by its guild members in the past, except this audience room. Under Ainz's orders, the Floor Guardians had put great consideration (though it wasn't as though much consideration was necessary anyways) into refitting an empty room for this exact purpose.

It made Ainz quite happy.

NPCs, made by the guild members, had grown beyond being mere NPCs. It was as though they had become Players.

There will always come a day when the chicks leave their nest to fly on their own, huh?

Ainz smiled mentally.

Every one of them had made him proud.

Suzuki Satoru had no children and not many of the other guild members did either. He wasn't sure, but perhaps this was what it was like to be a father. At any rate, this was not what it would be like to be a mother, probably.

He immersed himself in his own thoughts for a bit. However, no one would speak until he had spoken, so he was forced to despite not being the emcee or something similar.

"So, Albedo. Tell me the reason why everyone was gathered here. It's something important to Nazarick, or rather, to the Sorcerer Kingdom, right?"

"Yes. Simply put, our grain that was being transported through the Kingdom towards the Holy Kingdom was plundered four days ago."

"Oh... and who did that?"

"A noble of the Kingdom."

The light in Ainz's eyes flashed for a moment. Albedo was being vague. Normally, she would report the name, military power, and goal of the noble all at once. *Why is that?* Ainz thought about it as he asked further,

“Did the Eight Fingers’ merchant in charge of transportation not have soldiers guard the caravans? Moreover, the rule was that our flag should have been flown, yes? Which meant the Kingdom had chosen to start a war with us?”

He had thought, judging by the Kingdom’s actions, that they were trying to avoid a war, but it now seemed to be an incorrect judgment. Or, was the incident itself some kind of strategy? Ainz took notice of another possibility as his thoughts developed.

“Could it be that the Eight Fingers had betrayed us?”

“No, well…”

Albedo lowered her head as she muttered, she then glanced at Ainz as if she were trying to sneak a peek.

Ainz thought that her current attitude was quite rare. Rather, this might have been the first time she has ever shown this kind of behavior. She was behaving like a little girl who was afraid of getting scolded, definitely unlike the Overseer she had always been.

“What’s wrong, Albedo? Is something the matter?”

Ainz carefully maintained his dignified facade and felt as if his back was soaked with sweat. Ainz, of course, could not sweat.

Was it because of a mistake Ainz had made? If that was the case then Albedo’s response would make sense.

She was behaving like an employee who’d had to point out the mistakes her boss had made that messed everything up.

A noble of the Kingdom? I have no idea… Did I do something? I didn’t do anything funny in the past few months, did I? No, could I?

As Ainz, who couldn’t even remember the documents he had stamped a few weeks ago, thought about it, it felt more and more like it was a mistake of his own. His anxiety grew alongside his thoughts.

No, wait! I got it! I got it! Didn’t I tell Albedo and Demiurge during the Holy Kingdom thing? And I told a lot of people the same thing after coming back. Yes, I made a mistake deliberately! Past me, you’re great! Wait, now is the time… to use that excuse!

Ainz had always thought that the title of an absolute overlord was too much for him to bear. It was about time for him to take it off.

He had a cordial smile on his face.

“Don’t worry about it, Albedo. Tell me about it.”

“Yes… Ainz-sama. Surely you remember our plan to make use of an idiotic noble for the purpose of gaining control over the Kingdom…”

Hmm? Ainz raised a question in his mind. What she said was not what he had expected, but at this point Ainz knew what to say.

"That fool had something to do with it?"

Albedo nodded, "Yes. That dimwit had caused this incident. Ainz-sama has probably realized by now the possibility that this could be a scheme of the Kingdom's ruling class."

More misunderstandings, huh? "Hmph..." Ainz started thinking. He couldn't see the deeper aspects of such a scheme, but it was probably beneficial to the Kingdom to convict a noble associated with Nazarick. That way, they could purge a pest from their ranks.

"I understand... but does the blame truly lie with that imbecile? It's not some ploy by the Kingdom is it? ...Wait, Albedo must have investigated the intel already. Sorry for unnecessary questions."

"No, those questions were only natural for you to ask, Ainz-sama. We have prepared a witness for this purpose. Shalltear."

"Understood."

Shalltear curtsied, stood up, and then left through the left door.

Right after that, a woman held on both sides by Death Knights returned with Shalltear.

She was so thin her bones were visible as if she were sick. She also had heavy bags under her eyes, did not wear any make-up, and had messy hair.

Tear stains could be seen around her bloodshot eyes, which darted around uncontrollably like a terrified, tiny creature.

Ainz remembered seeing that person somewhere, but he couldn't recall important details like her name and position.

As he tried his best to search through his memories, the Death Knights let go of her.

The woman knelt down in one smooth movement. It was flawless, one could even say that it was beautiful.

It was something that was only possible through a suitable amount of training. Ainz even felt a bit of respect for her because of that.

"Yoar, yoar mejasty..." her voice was trembling a lot. She paused for a moment, then spoke again, "Your Majesty."

The room fell silent. Realizing that it was his turn to speak, Ainz said in a deep voice, "—Woman, I permit you to speak your name."

"Ah! Hilma Cygnaeus, Your Majesty!"

His reawakened memories spread like vines. She was one of the leaders of the Eight Fingers, the Kingdom's crime syndicate.

"Ah, ah."

It was not known how she understood the noise that Ainz had made subconsciously. Hilma, who had not raised her head even once, yelled as her forehead rubbed against the floor.

"I, I have no idea! No idea! I have absolutely no intention of disobedience! The grain robbery has nothing to do with me!"

Ainz took a glimpse at Albedo's back.

It would be incredibly easy to determine if the woman had lied, so Albedo must have done so. So why did she not report the results directly to Ainz?

Ainz didn't know what Albedo was thinking, but it certainly wasn't about stabbing him in the back. Actually, it was probably the opposite. There was some unknown misunderstanding that was borne of her holding Ainz in too high of a regard. It would not be appropriate to ask her about it directly.

I got myself into this situation because I repeatedly performed as my persona, didn't I? Albedo won't understand if this continues on. Should I ask and see what happens? It would've been fine if Albedo was the only one who was here, but the others are also here... Ainz looked at Aura and Mare. *Hmm, next time I guess.*

"—Umu. First of all, let me confirm if Cygnaeus was telling the truth. [Dominate]."

After the spell had been cast, Ainz asked Cygnaeus:

"Did you play any role in that noble robbing our grain convoy?"

"None whatsoever!"

A dominated individual could not lie to their dominator, which meant that Cygnaeus had no direct connections to the incident. Though an indirect connection was still possible, it wouldn't have made it her responsibility. The hypothetical that she had been lying by ways of memory manipulation was unlikely.

"—Have you been described by others as having multiple personalities?"

"No!"

"Umu... then do you wish to oppose us?"

"Not at all! I don't have the slightest intention to! Absolutely not!"

She denied with her fiercest tone yet. Bearing witness to this, Ainz released her from his [Dominate].

"If we were to punish her based on a crime she wasn't purposely responsible

for would be too harsh. Cygnaeus, not guilty. That's my ruling."

Cygnaeus raised her head and gazed towards Ainz with a brilliant passion within her eyes, to the point where Ainz found it to be terrifying.

"But, Ainz-sama. Shouldn't the faults of a subordinate be the responsibility of their superiors? That cretin was her responsibility."

Albedo was right.

"You, you're absolutely correct! But he took those actions randomly and of his own accord! I had instructed him multiple times! 'Contact me before you do anything!' I had even appointed a subordinate to monitor him for this exact reason!"

Albedo did not object to her explanation. So that was the truth. She had performed her duties to the utmost, so it would be too cruel to let her shoulder the full responsibility for this incident.

{Albedo}, Human Resources, had hired a {simpleton} who caused major issues in {Cygnaeus}, the department. Though it's obvious that there were issues within that department, Ainz also understood the tendency to want to blame this on HR.

{Ainz}, the salaryman, thought about this issue from Cygnaeus' perspective.

If he were to leave this matter to Albedo and the others, they would surely dish out severe punishments to her. Then—

"—The faults of a subordinate are the responsibility of their superior. I concur with that statement."

Ainz watched as the color drained from Hilma's face and continued,

"But, that proverb was said by a leader who wished to shoulder the burden of their subordinate, it was not meant as a way for subordinates to shift blame onto their superiors. As for how encompassing the statement could be: Albedo, let me ask you a question. Cygnaeus was in charge of that dunce, but who was in charge of Cygnaeus?"

"That's — that's my responsibility."

"Umu. And I am your master, so the responsibility for this incident falls on me in the end, correct?"

"W-W-We wouldn't dare! This is absolutely not the fault of Ainz-sama!"

Albedo disavowed his statement with an uncharacteristically panicked expression.

Cygnaeus, whose expression just a moment prior had been one foretelling of their own doom, now gazed upon Ainz with the same spark in her eyes as before.

Her face was almost ever-changing.

"Though Cygnaeus' *modus operandi* may be flawed, she had performed according to the expectations of her office. For that, she has been forgiven. The first time an error occurs, it is because everyone makes mistakes. The second time around it would be the result of carelessness. The third time should have been avoidable. The fourth time is the one to indicate one's incompetence — Cygnaeus."

"Yes!!"

Cygnaeus lowered her head so much that it made an audible impact with the floor. It looked painful even from an outside perspective.

"To prevent a similar incident from occurring again, work harder on your preventative measures. Prepare a set of all of the plans you could think up of, submit them to Albedo, and wait for approval. That will be your punishment.

"Yes!!"

Cygnaeus rubbed her head against the ground, as if she was trying to lower her head even further.

That seems unnecessary. Ainz thought as he turned to look towards the guardians.

"That is my decision — do you have any comments? I will not get angry, so you are free to speak your minds."

No one seemed to have objections. Still, every one of them was capable of saying "Ainz-sama's decisions are always correct" with a straight face even if they had any dissenting opinions, so it wasn't likely that they would give voice to those opinions. In any case, it was better to confirm than not.

"—Albedo."

"No objections."

"—Demiurge."

"I concur with Albedo."

"—Aura."

"None."

"—Mare."

"Ah! Y-yes. I don't have any objections."

"—Cocytus."

"No. Objections."

"—Shalltear."

"None."

Were they really fine with it or were they too afraid to speak up? Ainz wasn't sure, but he had at least received their approval.

Ainz forcefully nodded his head and made his judgment final.

"...Good. Now then, Cygnaeus. Prepare those plans within a few days, that is... have them ready within two days."

Cygnaeus audibly whipped her head upwards.

"Understood! I'm grateful for my lord's merciful judgment!! I thank you from the deepest depths of my heart!! Oh Sorcerer King-heika!! Please allow me, Hilma Cygnaeus, to continue loyally serving you from now on!!"

"Is that so...?"

Cygnaeus' almost revolting amount of passion reminded him of a girl he had met in the past with scary-looking eyes.[7]

"I look forward to your loyal service. Now then, Shalltear, please send Cygnaeus back."

"Understood."

Shalltear took Hilma along as she activated her ring's function, the destination of their teleportation was the surface. She should be using [Gate] afterwards so it shouldn't take too long. With that in mind, they waited in place for her. Not too long after, Shalltear returned alone as he had expected.

"Now then — that couldn't be the only reason I was called here for, right?"

If that was the only reason why then he would be thanking his lucky stars, but that wish was shattered by Albedo.

"Yes, it is exactly as you have surmised."

Ainz looked at Albedo as if he had held a grudge against her. He would have loved it if she had only let him hold onto that hope for just a while longer.

"Umm, is something wrong? Perhaps just then..."

"No, nothing's wrong. Now then, how about you tell me the true purpose behind you calling me — gathering every Floor Guardian here?"

Albedo and Demiurge exchanged glances upon being asked.

"First on the docket, for what purpose did that buffoon undertake his actions? Was someone manipulating him as part of their ploy? That is certainly possible. Depending on the answer to those questions, we may have to significantly revise our plans against the Kingdom. For that it would be nice to know what Ainz-sama's thoughts are on the matter, so I proposed that we ask for your presence."

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7. Refers to Neia Baraja.

“Umu... As of now our strategy against the Kingdom had been ‘Candy and Whip’ hadn’t it? Have you explained the concept to Aura, Mare, Cocytus, and Shalltear before?”

“Demiurge and I were in the process of doing so, but we have yet to explain the specific details of the plan.”

“Is that so? Then Albedo, please share the intel with everybody. Any suggestions or opinions from you all could be helpful.”

“Understood.”

Albedo began her explanation to the four of them.

The Candy and Whip strategy (coined by Ainz, the term was popular due to its simplistic nature) to prepare the Kingdom for a takeover was in essence a plan to destabilize the Kingdom from the inside to the point where a portion of the Kingdom’s citizens would actively hope for peaceful foreign intervention by the Sorcerer Kingdom.

Was it because Demiurge was also involved in the planning process? The plan began sounding more and more like what they had done in the Holy Kingdom. It was a strategy that depended on internal conflicts and would thus cause a massive loss of life at the start. His preference for internal conflicts over physically invading a country was probably due to him being a fiend. If Cocytus or Shalltear were in charge of planning, they would probably prefer more direct methods such as a full-blown invasion.

But apparently this plan had been formulated by someone within the Kingdom and Albedo and Demiurge had only made slight modifications on top of the original.

That imbecile of a noble was a crucial element of this strategy.

He was meant to start a revolution. In conjunction with the internal conflicts initiated by their grain shortage, the Kingdom would then be forced to request aid from the Sorcerer Kingdom. There were multiple ways to make use of the nobility, but they would all create a reason for the Sorcerer Kingdom to intervene in the Kingdom’s affairs.

This meant that to Ainz, everything was still going according to plan. The incident caused by that dimwit was more than enough justification for the Sorcerer Kingdom to involve themselves.

However, it appeared as though Albedo and Demiurge were a bit worried by the current situation. There had to be something that Ainz was missing.

“Now then, Albedo. Though I want to ask questions of a fundamental nature...

Do we actually have evidence that noble caused the incident? Do we have clues that this was a ploy by the Kingdom? I recall something... about Albedo's scheduled correspondence with that noble we were supposed to get under our influences?"

Albedo had complained to Ainz time after time about "having to send letters to that unpleasant noble," "a mere human...", or something similar. She had also requested Ainz to review said letters so he had to read them on numerous occasions.

If it was simple paperwork, Ainz would still know a bit about it, but he had no confidence in his ability to proofread or edit. He tried to avoid having to do so but Albedo had begged him in earnest, so he had to.

By the way, though much time had passed since he came to this world, Ainz still hadn't learned to read the language.

The best he could do was write out his and Momon's names and recognize numbers. Compared to Albedo, Demiurge, and Pandora's Actor, who understood the language of several countries, it was easy to see how their brains functioned on a completely different level than his. It was for this reason that Ainz had to rely on magical items to understand any texts.

If he was being honest, he didn't think any edits would be necessary so he just handed them back as is to Albedo.

"I've also seen the letters that noble had sent back in response and frankly it appears as though he was completely charmed by you. I did not think that he would be the type to oppose the Sorcerer Kingdom."

He had heard of a saying that betrayal from one's crush could lead one to become irrationally hateful. Like finding out the cute voice actor you stan[8] had a boyfriend. As this thought came to mind, Ainz could see a reflection of his friend of yesteryear crying tears of blood in Shalltear's place.

He could also see in Aura and Mare's place, that friend's sister laughing at him.

"Yes, we've conducted detailed investigations into this matter, it is undeniably true that that man was the mastermind behind the grain robbery. But... the possibility that he could have been charmed, brain-washed, or controlled in any other way is certainly not zero... the only thing we could be sure of is that he had committed the crime."

"Perhaps this was a ploy by someone of an even higher intellect than us. If

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8. To "stan" means to "exhibit fandom to an extreme or excessive degree."

that was the case, then there is the possibility that they are somehow taking advantage of his actions…"

Albedo had a troubled expression and so did Demiurge. What Ainz found unbelievable was the possibility that someone who could rival the intellect of these two would just show up out of the blue. Or rather—

"Maybe that nobleman did what he did without thinking it through?"

If that was the case, then it would make a lot more sense to Ainz.

"Ainz-sama, I don't believe that's possible…"

Albedo said in a tone as if she were apologizing. This was the first time she had adopted such an attitude and Ainz couldn't help but feel refreshed from this new kind of behavior.

"No, wait a second, Albedo. We are only able to make pre-emptive moves against the strategies of some genius, but Ainz-sama could even see through an idiot's rash actions. There's always the possibility that it could be the case, is there not? No, isn't that explanation the most plausible?"

"B-but… to be that stupid… is it really possible…? But Ainz-sama…"

"If Ainz-sama said so, then isn't it the truth? Albedo."

"I-I guess so, I think…"

For some reason Aura and Mare had butted in to back up Demiurge's argument, stunning Ainz who had simply muttered a throwaway comment.

"If that's the case—"

Albedo and Demiurge furrowed their brows and began to debate.

"Hol-hold on a second. Let's hear the opinions of the other Floor Guardians regarding the operation. They must have quite a lot of questions, so let's set aside some time for that. Those of you with questions could just raise your hands and Albedo or Demiurge will answer them."

Please don't direct any questions at me! Ainz had put up a white flag in his mind already.

"Umm, I have a question," Aura said as she raised her hand, "why didn't we just draw in as many of the nobility as we could at the start of the operation? If we did that, we could just kill off that troublesome noble and continue the operation as we had planned, right?"

The one to answer this question was Demiurge.

"We had considered that during the planning phase, but ultimately chose to abandon that idea after deliberations. It would have been fine had we drawn in outstanding noblemen, but the nobles of the Kingdom aren't exactly known for

their intellect, now are they? With that in mind, the more people we drew into the fold, the more likely it was for an unexpected leak in intel to occur. That was why we had decided to focus on an individual and have them form and manage a new faction."

Things were the way they were because they hadn't expected that person to be such a wildcard.

The next one to raise their hand was Cocytus.

"We. Could. Not. Make. Use. Of. The. Exceptional. Nobles?"

"It wasn't as though we couldn't. In fact, we had recruited someone like that already... it's so easy to blackmail a doting father. We had considered the fact that we would want to spare the noblemen who were at least somewhat capable, which was why we chose the expendable portion of the nobility. Don't you believe that it's necessary for us to clear out the moronic few so that the country could become one worthy of being ruled over by Ainz-sama? That was why we formed a faction that was filled with people that were incompetent in various forms. As a metaphor, think of it as preparing a rubbish bin before throwing away trash. Of course, we had received intel on the talented people of the Kingdom, but we wanted to also collect intel of our own directly from the source."

"Because the Sorcerer Kingdom has no need for nobles other than a few of them who are either talented or hard-working ascetics."

"I have a question," Shalltear said as she raised her hand," I'm not sure I understand ~arinsu. Even if that dolt of a nobleman was being manipulated into doing what he did, did his actions not constitute an attack against the Sorcerer Kingdom? If so, shouldn't the Sorcerer Kingdom use that as casus belli to invade the Kingdom ~arinsu? If it really was a trap set by someone, could we not just crush them?"

"That is correct, we should have done so especially if there were no hidden masterminds... but... hmm."

Albedo glanced at Demiurge, prompting him to answer, "That's right." Demiurge then turned his gaze towards Ainz before looking towards the guardians.

"It is extremely difficult to find the right balance in dealing with the situation. Though now that we have Ainz-sama's superior insight, we've come to understand that the nobleman had committed this act without putting much thought into it. If we were to lightly punish him for this transgression, the Sorcerer Kingdom will be looked down upon by other nations. So, what do you

all believe is the suitable punishment for someone who had attacked a caravan flying the Sorcerer Kingdom's flag — something that essentially signified Ainz-sama himself — and had stained Ainz-sama's public image?"

"We should kill him."

"Yeah, I think Onee-chan is correct."

"That's right. That's how it should be. Now then, I must ask you all. Do we simply let this slide after we have dealt with the criminal himself?"

"That. Will. Not. Do. His. Master. Must. Also. Answer. For. This. Crime."

Cocytus nodded his head in silence.

Ainz had never been more shocked than he was at this moment.

Though it was surprising that the guardians would have such an overreaction, it wasn't too out of the ordinary considering their personalities. What Ainz was shocked about was how they had accepted his throwaway comment about the noble as the truth at face value.

To be honest, it was quite scary.

"That's right, I also agree with Shalltear's judgment. For them to be dumb enough to make a fool out of Ainz-sama, I say we need to mete out appropriate punishments to the entire Kingdom! But, back then..."

"Ainz-sama once said that 'to rule over a ruined nation would be bad for our reputation.'[9] I've also heard that Ainz-sama has no interest in standing atop a pile of rubble,[10] so we should try our best to avoid that kind of situation."

Upon hearing what Demiurge had to say, Albedo nodded her head.

Ainz had two questions in mind in response.

First, has he ever said something like that before?

If you surveyed a hundred of Nazarick's denizens on the question, "Who is correct, Ainz or Demiurge?" perhaps a majority, no, 99 of them would be certain that it was Ainz. Only a single person would be against that notion and that person is Ainz Ooal Gown.

But how credible could he be as a person who couldn't even remember what had happened a week ago?

Which was why, although Ainz had no recollections of this, since Demiurge had said so, he must have said something along those lines in the past. If that was the case, then there was only one correct way to approach this.

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9. See Web Novel *Overlord: Part 1*, "Chapter 94: Negotiations Part 7."
10. See Light Novel *Volume 10: The Ruler of Conspiracy*, "Chapter 3: The Baharuth Empire."

"As expected of you to have remembered what I had said. Demiurge, you've made me very happy."

"I-I remember too!"

"I do too, Ainz-sama!"

"Umu. Umu. Shalltear, Aura. I'm thankful for you two too."

He couldn't figure out if they had actually remembered or had not but were simply concurring with Demiurge, just like what he was doing.

Speaking of which, how have they still not figured out the truth that he's incompetent? Was he really that good at acting?

Much time had passed since he came to this world as the overlord of Nazarick. He had been operating as their overlord this entire time. They should have seen through his "overlord" disguise already, they should have seen through the useless nature of Satoru by now.

The conversation continued on as he agonized over this.

"So, in keeping with Ainz-sama's wishes, we will not be punishing the whole of the Kingdom. However, we can't just let them get away with a light punishment. We will also have to put the plan on pause or abandon it entirely for now. At the very least, it will require major deviations."

Ainz couldn't help but feel a great sense of guilt at the fact that his words held such prominence in their minds.

"...So that was why. But, Demiurge, did the plans really fail this time?"

Demiurge, Albedo, and their assistant in the Kingdom possessed an incomprehensible level of genius in Ainz's perspective. Would the plan that was the culmination of their minds truly fail? If that was the case, he must keep in mind what he says to them from this point onward. It would probably be best if he kept his mouth shut from now on. So, just in case, he asked again,

"Are we really abandoning our plans? The Candy and Whip plan?"

"....."

Demiurge looked towards Ainz with a bewildered expression, he had seen this expression on numerous occasions. It was the expression he had made when he was trying to figure out the true meaning behind his words as if they were all euphemisms said by a being on a completely different level of brilliance.

Wrong. Demiurge. I'm just trying to reaffirm what you've said. There are no hidden layers of meanings. You should chill out by taking a bath first.

These thoughts disappeared right as Ainz was about to give voice to them.

Just as an unpleasant premonition surfaced in his mind, just as Ainz had

expected, Demiurge stood aghast as if he had just had a sudden realization.

"...No wait, could it be... Ainz-sama. Could it be that you have had the same intention back when you immaculately brought the Empire under our dominion?"

His premonitions were right on the target.

What is he saying?

Ainz started ranting towards Demiurge in his mind, *what kind of a thought process would lead you to that conclusion?!*

"No, that's not that case at all" would be the best response, right? But would that response really be appropriate?

"—That's right."

After he vacillated for quite a long time, this was his reply. For some unknown reason, Albedo's eyes were opened as wide as Demiurge's.

It was a bit, no, it was extremely terrifying.

"I see... so that was why Ainz-sama had repeatedly instructed us to do so... please forgive your subordinate for not realizing it immediately, I have disappointed my master."

"No, Demiurge. How could someone like you, no, how could people like us ever hope to be able to fully comprehend Ainz-sama's ingenious plans? To have forgotten that Ainz-sama's every move was made with a multitude of intents may have been our greatest failure."

"—That's right. It's just as you have said. To have applied the Candy and Whip policy on a national level. As expected of our Ainz-sama. As expected of the leader of the Supreme Beings..."

Hmph! Ainz laughed at himself.

He could no longer understand what these two were talking about.

In that moment, a thought flashed across his mind. What if these two had already realized Ainz's incompetence and were just trying to cover for him?

They're both geniuses. The truth is, I can't even comprehend how much smarter they are than me. How long would people like them continue to mistake my stupidity for genius? No, that shouldn't have even been possible!

"Ainz-sama. Is. Truly. The. Greatest. Mind. Of. Nazarick."

"Exactly, you're completely correct, Cocytus. To Ainz-sama, someone who's capable of planning on the scale of millennia and myriad years into the future, something on the scale of a few years is nothing."

"Eh? I-is that true...? As expected of Ainz-sama."

"To be able to plan for millennia ahead, I'm truly in awe... Ainz-sama."

What is Demiurge talking about?

Who? When did they say that? How would someone be able to plan that far ahead into the future? Don't make stuff up on your own! Ainz suppressed his desire to yell out his thoughts. It would be bad if the two naive children took it as the truth.

However, since he had been approving every single one of Demiurge's suggestions, he no longer knew the best way to respond to him now. Plus, if he was to object now, it would most likely create issues for him in the future.

So I still have to act as usual?

If Ainz was capable of facial expressions, he would probably have a dubious smile right now. After racking his brain, he managed to come up with a response that neither confirmed nor denied Demiurge's statement,

"No, that's not the case at all."

"There's no need for our master to be so humble ~arinsu. Oh great Ainz-sama!"

"To. Be. Able. To. Think. This. Far. Out. Into. The. Future... No, If. That. Was. Not. The. Case. Then. He. Would. Not. Have. Been. The. Leader. Of. The. Supreme. Beings."

He couldn't handle it any longer, he should just give up the facade.

Ainz made his decision.

"Now then, since we now have Ainz-sama's permission, let's give unto the Kingdom the most miserable of punishments."

"Eh?"

How did the word "miserable" show up in their conversation up to this point? Ainz was completely baffled.

Albedo clasped her hands together and grinned brightly. The adorable Albedo and Demiurge spoke in unison,

"The Empire, who had surrendered immediately to Ainz-sama, had been given the Candy. The Kingdom, who had not surrendered, will be given the Whip. By doing so, we will be sending a message to everyone else. Candy and Whip, the people of this world must choose between them. Wooo, things are getting a little more interesting aren't they, Ainz-sama?"

"Uh..."

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Hilma was violently thrown back to where she was taken from. The [Gate] that had transported her back was gone by the time she turned around to look.

She surveyed her surroundings as she nursed the arm that had made impact with the ground when she was thrown out. She was in a well-ventilated, spacious, and familiar room.

This used to be the head of the gambling division, Noah Zweden's mansion. He had originally purchased this swath of land with the intention to build a casino on top of it, which was illegal. They had successfully built the associated mansion, but due to unforeseen circumstances, the remainder of the plans had to be cancelled.

Because of this, the mansion had included enormous rooms meant for gambling and Hilma was in the largest room of them all.

Hilma finally calmed down and sighed deeply.

Her body quivered as it was overtaken with joy.

"Hilma!"

Her companions rushed over to her. There were three others in the room, including Oskar who rang the handbell on the table.

Their eyes were filled with tears.

Surely their pale expressions were all out of concern for her wellbeing.

"Are you alright?! Is anything wrong?! How's your stomach?"

"We have some fruit wine! Do you want to wet your beak?"

"The rest of them will come here soon!"

"Noah, Endio, and Oskar—" the three quieted down upon hearing Hilma's voice, "—I'm sorry I made you guys worry about me."

"Never mind that! You must have suffered through a lot. You should take a rest immediately."

Noah wiped the tears from the corners of his eyes as he said this. He must have thought that she had experienced "that" or something equally as horrifying. Hilma had no option but to explain herself.

"I wasn't put through 'that,' they didn't do anything to me."

The atmosphere grew thick as the companions who had been surrounding her had their confused expressions gradually surface as if to say, *was that something that was even possible?*

"I also met with His Majesty, His Majesty the Sorcerer King."

Hilma's moist eyes were like a broken breakwater as a never-ending stream of tears flowed out.

"His Majesty the Sorcerer King..."

As his title alone commanded an inconceivable amount of fear, Endio made the sign of a god that he didn't even believe in as he spoke while the other two began to frantically look around the room.

Perhaps they were trying to look for any eavesdroppers, even though they had never seen any. It was common knowledge between them that there was always the possibility that someone could be listening in on them.

"You met — no, you were granted an audience with him? Glad you were able to return successfully then."

"Ufufu..."

Hilma, who was still crying, gave a smile as her reply.

Though everybody had been called on by the Sorcerer King, they had bowed the entire time so no one really caught a good look at his face.

However, through the intel they had gathered and second-hand accounts of people who had stolen glances at him, the Eight Fingers, including Hilma, arrived at the unmistakable conclusion that the Sorcerer King was the avatar of evil. No, he was simply a magic caster who would use such cruel methods of torture and could ruthlessly crush the soldiers of the Kingdom.

"His Majesty was... His Majesty was truly a reasonable master. Not only was he tolerant of my failures, but he was also merciful in his ruling."

Suddenly the world around them felt as though time had stopped.

Noah was shocked for a moment, but then he shut his eyes as if to offer his pity.

In truth, if someone else had said this, the Hilma of a few minutes ago would have probably thought the same as they did. *So that was what happened, she's completely broken* or something similar.

The two behind her spoke with bloodshot eyes, "Hilma... I'm more or less envious of your current situation," "Ahhh, if only I was there with you back there...", and other laments.

"No, hold on a second. Perhaps she has some sort of mind-control spell cast on her, Hilma, is that true?"

Noah wouldn't stop asking. Of course, she herself knew that she wasn't under the influence of any spells but at the same time, she could not prove it definitively to them. Because of that, she just simply ignored his questions and

continued to talk. Whether they believe her or not is up to them.

"I didn't think that I would be returning alive too, the reason why I could return without a scratch was because of our master. His Majesty the Sorcerer King — truly someone fit to be called a king. If our master wasn't there..."

Perhaps she would have been forced to take responsibility for what had happened. Perhaps — no, this wasn't a hypothetical, she would have definitely been implicated due to that idiot's actions and suffer a hellish punishment for it. The Prime Minister of the Sorcerer Kingdom, Albedo, would've definitely done that.

If she were in her place, she would have also had someone take the fall for it even if the punishment was not death but simply pain and suffering. So from her perspective, the Sorcerer King's decision was infinitely more merciful than the one she would have given.

"...Hilma. Sorry to interrupt your spiel on His Majesty's mercy, but that was out of his Candy and Whip policy."

"Is that so...? Ummm, perhaps that was the reason why."

Though she had said so, Hilma did not believe that to be the case.

Hilma could tell a person's inner thoughts by the fluctuations in their voice, their expressions, and their partialities.

This wasn't some unusual ability, but just something she had picked up over time with experience. It was accurate to a certain degree and if those feelings were to be trusted, the Sorcerer King and Albedo were not playing the routine of Good Cop/Bad Cop.

The reason why she wasn't completely certain of her own judgment was because it was incredibly difficult to read the Sorcerer King's thoughts given how he had no facial expressions to speak of. So there was a chance that his assumptions were correct.

"That's right. After all, I've done so in the past too so I'm quite familiar with it. But... ahhh, how sweet is the Candy to those who had tasted the pain the Whip could inflict! Perhaps we were lied to, perhaps His Majesty the Sorcerer King is a terrifying being that could not empathize with people and his confidants were there to make sure that he doesn't go overboard. Even so, I would still be inclined to believe him. No... or I wanted to believe him."

Ladies of the night who were easily swindled by men and were subsequently devastated was something Hilma had seen one too many times. She knew that she was no different than those troubled women she had seen in the past. Even

so, she couldn't resist the Sorcerer King's ability to draw people closer to him.

"...Hilma. You've bore witness to countless types of men. You're the best out of us all in terms of understanding people, especially men. Tell the truth, what kind of man is His Majesty the Sorcerer King?"

As a high-class prostitute, it was true that she had seen all kinds of men, especially those who were high in status or had great authority over people. She had seen that type of man so often that it had become annoying for her.

If she were to compare and contrast them—

"If I were to describe him with a single phrase, it would be 'a merciful master.' He has the clarity of mind to think and judge but also the flexibility to accommodate his subordinate's constructive suggestions into his own train of thought. He does not seek schadenfreude as a hobby, which would have been par for the course. How should I put this... right, he just didn't give off that kind of an aura, you know? Of course, he would still give out punishments callously if he felt they were necessary."

"That is high praise, coming from you."

The slightest suggestion of a smile broke out on Hilma's tear-stained face as she laughed, "Ufufu."

"That's right. Though our master is of the undead, he embodies justice and mercy. Even when he's being callous, he isn't being cruel. After all, the consequence of failure is punishment. He could have killed me to send a message to you all, but His Majesty did not do so."

She didn't know who had just swallowed audibly, but the sound was reverberating through the spacious room.

"I hope His Majesty the Sorcerer King will remain with us forever. If it was our master, he would have..."

A depressing silence weighed heavily on their hearts.

"Hoooooh..."

Someone breathed out the way a missionary would if they had borne witness to a miracle.

They did not know when that hellish fate would befall them, but as people who had lived in constant fear, this was salvation.

"I see... so you're saying that we must be even more loyal than we already are, right?"

"Yes, Noah. We should do so... now that we know. But the Prime Minister of the Sorcerer Kingdom, Albedo, is still a terrifying master. I can't imagine her

saying the same words His Majesty the Sorcerer King had said to me…”

Though she had mumbled that last sentence to herself, her companions who had heard her all had looks of surprise on their faces.

It was difficult to read the thoughts of the demon known as Albedo, but her intuition had told her that something was wrong in that moment.

Perhaps it was because her brain was in overdrive under those extreme conditions.

Her intuition told her:

Even though the Sorcerer King could be considered a compassionate figure, Albedo was someone who saw people as mere toys. Something like that.

Hilma really wanted to try her best to make it so that she and her companions could become direct subordinates under the Sorcerer King. He would be the type of master to reward someone based on their performance and would not treat his subordinates unreasonably.

“Everyone. Let’s work even harder for His Majesty the Sorcerer King.”

Hilma said to the three in front of her and shared her thoughts. Afterwards, she began seeking assistance from various sources for the task she had been given by the Sorcerer King.



Chapter 2 Countdown to Extinction

1

In the capital city of the Kingdom of Re-Estize, in the Valencia Palace.

One of the rooms had a kind of heat typical of the number of people gathered inside. Though that number was not high by any means, the room wasn't spacious either. The point was, the people in that room were so serious and occupied with their tasks that they had begun to raise the temperature of the room bit by bit.

In the center of the room sat a rectangular meeting table and situated on the most important seat in the room was Ramposa III. Seated to his right was the Second Prince, Zanac, and the rest of the seats had been filled by the Kingdom's courtiers and ministers. Due to the fact that they were all advanced in years, if you were to take a look around the room, all you would see were white hair on white heads and shiny bald heads.

If this was a normal situation, everyone except the king would have stood up to pay their respects and then properly initiate the meeting — this was the protocol after all — but that was not what had happened. Each one of them had a cup filled with tea in front of them, signifying the potential length of this meeting.

After confirming that everybody had received the materials they had prepared, Zanac said loudly,

"Let's start the court meeting then. The topic of this meeting will be the declaration of war we have received from the Sorcerer Kingdom." He had used a term as intense as "declaration of war" in hopes that everyone would treat this meeting with the gravity it deserves.

The truth was, the white-haired Interior Minister, who was around the age of his father, had the most displeased expression out of them all. It seemed that he was deeply anxious about the emergency.

Zanac took a stealthy glance at the side of his father's face. He was worried the most about his father's judgment. Was his father still capable of fully understanding how dangerous this situation could be and take appropriate actions against it?

He probably has some convictions against the Sorcerer King who had killed "that guy"...

He had heard that after his father received news of the Warrior-Captain Gazef Stronoff's death, he was shaken to his core and couldn't think straight. After it was explained to him how resurrection was not possible, he flew into a rage that had never been seen before. Zanac bore witness to it all as he was there with his father when it occurred.

Since then, his father appeared to have aged quite significantly. He had lost all motivation and was as lifeless as a mannequin constructed out of flesh and bone.

Would his father, who had been traumatized this much, be able to make a calm judgment against his sworn enemy, the Sorcerer Kingdom?

It'll be up to me then—

Zanac felt uneasy so he took a peek at the ministers.

The topic of this meeting was something that was delivered to them days ago by an envoy from the Sorcerer Kingdom, an official document that bore the royal seal of the Sorcerer Kingdom. The content of the document reads, "A grain convoy meant to serve as humanitarian aid from the Sorcerer Kingdom to the Holy Kingdom had been taken by force by a citizen of the Kingdom. We deem it a hostile action against the Sorcerer Kingdom and hereby declare war on your country."

The document also bore the seals of other countries that approved of the Sorcerer Kingdom's actions.

As of now, the envoy was staying within the capital, waiting to deliver the Kingdom's response letter back. Given that this was an official communication between countries through documents, it would not have been unusual to give the other side a week or two to respond. Even then, for them to reach consensus on a response, finish their preparations, complete investigations, et cetera would probably take them more time than they have on hand, even if they were to rush through every process.

"I'm terribly sorry, because we have had to investigate two of the six seals on the document from the envoy, it took us quite a bit of time."

The one who had lowered his head was the Minister of Foreign Affairs, who was also the minister of seals and was in charge of the investigation over the seals approving of the Sorcerer Kingdom's decision.

"The ones we were certain of before were the four from the Sorcerer Kingdom, the Empire, the Draconic Kingdom, and the Holy Kingdom, correct?"

The Minister of Foreign Affairs nodded in response to the Minister of Finance's question.

"That is correct. Of the two remaining — one was from the Dwarven Nation. Though we had identified the design as Dwarven, the seal still had some variations compared to the ones on the documents we've had from them from two centuries ago. After we received the assistance from Re-Blumrushur with the investigation, we found a similar seal, so we judged that it was probably a remake of the original after a certain era. The other seal, the one that was next to the Holy Kingdom's, appeared to be the seal of the one they call the 'Faceless One.'"

"They placed an individual's stamp alongside the seals of state?"

The Minister of Military Affairs was in total disbelief.

He was the youngest of the ministers. Both him and Zanac lowered the average age of the room by quite a lot. With that said, he was already over 40.

His appearance did not do his rank of the Minister of Military Affairs justice; he was skinny, weak, and had a face that suggested he was neurotic. He seemed more like a financial personnel than a military one.

His relationship with Gazef had not been great — or rather, he had deliberately flaunted his dislike of him — so he was not heavily relied upon by Ramposa and had been absent from court meetings quite frequently. The lack of contact between them made Zanac unaware of his capabilities.

However, since Marquis Raeven had praised his abilities to Zanac, he should

be someone who could earn his keep at the very least. No matter what he was like as a person, he should at least be competent, right? No, if he wasn't at least competent he wouldn't have made it as a minister.

"It appears as though the Minister of Military Affairs is not too familiar with this matter. Usually, when the Holy Kingdom applies their national seal on a document, their high priestess would also stamp on the seal of their temple. This must be something similar to that."

"...So they're trying to send the message that the 'Faceless One' had already overtaken the authority of their religious institutions, or that she has authority above that of their current religious institutions?"

"Your servant believes that to be the case, Your Majesty. The document we received for the current Holy King's coronation still had the seal of their temple, so it appears that she had begun rapidly consolidating power right after that event. So even though we had never seen the stamp of this 'Faceless One' and could not confirm its validity, since it was stamped next to the national seal of the Holy Kingdom, we could only assume that to be the case."

"Other than the Council State and the Theocracy, most countries have approved of and joined the Sorcerer Kingdom's condemnation of the Kingdom. This wasn't subterfuge by the Sorcerer Kingdom, but the truth."

"Yes, Your Majesty."

His father let out a tired sigh.

"Has the Draconic Kingdom also bent their knees to the Sorcerer Kingdom?"

"We can't be certain, Your Majesty, because we have yet to receive intel on what had happened in the Draconic Kingdom. Perhaps they had fallen prey to some honeyed words or perhaps they simply felt that there was more to gain by siding with the Sorcerer Kingdom than siding with us."

The Draconic Kingdom was probably only endorsing the Sorcerer Kingdom's actions and was not participating in the war itself.

"Is that so? I understand, Minister of Foreign Affairs. Thank you for your hard work. Now then... Interior Minister, how many of those within the Kingdom believe in the contents of this document?

"Yes. Though we're not too sure about the entirety of the Kingdom, about seven-tenths of those within the court believe this to be a ploy of the Sorcerer Kingdom. About a tenth of us believe that it was done by highwaymen — that part of the peasantry that would be boorish and foolish enough to do such a thing. The remaining two-tenths believe that this could be the plot of a third

nation."

"Hmm, if it was a plot, their goal would most likely be to weaken the Kingdom and the Sorcerer Kingdom or to simply disrupt the peace between the Sorcerer Kingdom and the Kingdom. If that was the case, it has to be the Council State and the Theocracy."

"Your Majesty, I believe that conclusion to be too rash. There's also the possibility that the Empire is plotting to overturn its status as a vassal state. After all, if it was the knights of the Empire, they could probably easily charge and overwhelm a convoy."

"—That would not be possible. The incident happened on Kingdom soil. Did our investigations not reveal that there were tens of men? Even if it was the Empire or the Council State and the Theocracy, there would be no way they could bring so many soldiers onto our soil behind our backs. Or maybe, they had help from within. Perhaps they had hired bandits within the Kingdom, mercenaries would also be an option — the specifics do not matter, what matters is that we as a nation had committed a mistake."

The Minister of Military Affairs asserted that it was impossible for this to have been a plot that had been executed by soldiers foreign to the Kingdom.

Everyone knew how hard he had worked to maintain the public order which had almost collapsed within the Kingdom after that battle. He had proven his aptitude through the debacle, perhaps that was why he was so confident in his own judgment.

"It would have been hard with bandits, but I still hope that we could absorb some mercenaries into our ranks, but we simply do not have the capital to do so."

"Are you saying that our finances are not in order?"

"I did not say that at all."

"But you implied it—"

"Minister of Finance, Minister of Military Affairs, please stop arguing. We do not have time for that."

The two lowered their heads upon hearing the king speak.

The Minister of Military Affairs continued to speak to a now silent room.

"But, I have no doubt that this is some sort of a plot by someone. I have testimony from the guards at the gates that the caravan was flying the Sorcerer Kingdom's flag and had a pretty impressive security detail when they left the capital."

Most of the Kingdom's people knew of the massacre the Sorcerer Kingdom had committed on the Katze plains, so no one within the Kingdom would dare to provoke such a terrifying country.

If they had to deduce who was behind all of this, there was only one country that checked all the boxes.

—The Sorcerer Kingdom.

Everything made sense once they considered it as a self-orchestrated, self-performed plot.

They probably had ordered the caravan to burn or dispose of its cargo — or maybe they plainly did not load those wagons up in the first place — and made up the excuse that they were attacked by some non-existent entity. It was hard to imagine a more plausible explanation.

"Zanac, though not much time has passed, how much progress have you made on your investigations?"

"Actually... I have already found out who had started this incident."

The courtiers all had shocked expressions.

"...It's just that, that was what made it difficult. We had doubts about it being a conspiracy precisely because it was so easy to find the culprit. Would you be so kind as to give me a bit more time?"

"Of course, we have to investigate the exact details of this incident, but given the situation any amount of intel would be helpful. Can you report on what you have figured out — what you are absolutely certain of?"

"As you wish, My King. What we are certain of, is that the criminals in question include the one known as Baron Philip Dayton L'Eyre Montserrat and his serfs."

The courtiers began to speak, "Montserrat?" "Have you heard of that name?" "A baron and his serfs attacked the convoy?" "Were they trying to avenge someone who died in the battle?" "Perhaps he's one of those that does not put much thought into their actions?" "Emotions could lead one to go on unexpected rampages, couldn't they?"

In the midst of this, the one to speak up was the Minister of Justice who appeared to be pretty miffed,

"Your Majesty, this... this has to be a scheme of the Sorcerer Kingdom, correct? Your servant could not fathom why a noble of the Kingdom would mastermind something like this.

"I concur. Is the Sorcerer Kingdom not a country that would nonchalantly use

[Charm Person] in their courts? It is entirely possible that they couldn't care less about using equally sleazy methods on a national level. For example — was that baron being controlled using [Charm Person]?"

The phrase "I see" could be heard throughout the room. Zanac couldn't help but feel regret for leaking that information after hearing the accusations the minister made in the second half of rhetoric.

"If that's the case, we need to offer protection to that baron as soon as possible. Though I'm not too versed on the matter, I have heard that the spell called [Charm Person] leaves the victim with the memory of what happened when the spell was cast on them. Therefore, he would not remain silent."

Zanac wasn't as knowledgeable in magic as the minister, so he had made a rookie mistake.

"Summon that baron. Investigate what had happened. At the same time, protect him."

"—My King," Zanac did not want to say so, but after steeling himself he said, "after we find out what had happened, could we offer the head of that baron as an apology to the Sorcerer Kingdom?"

"What are you talking about?"

His father's gaze was sharp enough that it felt as though it was piercing right through him. Even when he was reduced to a skinny old man, the man who had borne the title of king for the longest time still had an aura that was worthy of praise.

I doubt I have the same level of majesty, but I won't back down so easily!

Even if this was a scheme by the Sorcerer Kingdom, was it really worth fighting a battle on the battlefield the enemy had specially prepared for themselves? He was terrified of the prospect that they would be continually arguing back and forth about whether "it's a scheme" or "it's not a scheme" up to the point when they will be engaged in a full-scale war.

Rather than wait for things to get to that point, it would be better to just give up the head of the noble who had started it all sooner than later and hope that it would de-escalate the situation.

It would be absolutely foolish to fight an opponent who had already demonstrated their superior powers in their previous battle. If a war was to occur, it was hard for him to imagine that the nobles who knew about that tragedy would still send their levies.

Even if they were willing to send their own soldiers, they would just be

endangering themselves.

"My King, I believe that we should avoid a war with the Sorcerer Kingdom."

"And so you would be willing to offer an innocent noble as a sacrifice? Is that something the heir to the throne should say? My son, think before you speak."

Zanac licked his lips and replied,

"My answer remains the same regardless of what the others may say. I believe that it's imperative for us to avoid a large loss of life with a small sacrifice."

"If we were to do that, should we just hand over the head of another loyal servant every time the Sorcerer Kingdom comes knocking on our door? Do you understand that simple logic?"

"I understand... but father should have seen the tragedy of the Katze plains which I had not. Would you still risk conflict with the Sorcerer Kingdom with that in mind?"

His father let out a sigh and curled his lips into a straight line. Zanac pressed home his advantage by following up with, "I am against the idea. Allow me to repeat myself, I believe that a war with that kind of country should be avoided at all costs, even if we have to sacrifice an innocent noble."

His speech was hardly fit for the heir to the throne. He might get called weak behind his back and lose the loyalty of a few courtiers because of this, but Zanac believed that this was the only path through which the Kingdom would survive.

"...Your Majesty. Your servant supports his Highness' proposal too."

The one to agree with him was the Minister of Internal Affairs, but he was about to add on to Zanac's proposal,

"Your Majesty, your servant understands your desire to protect all citizens. So how about we just — become a vassal state of the Sorcerer Kingdom?"

The courtiers began shouting "What are you talking about?!", "Have you lost your sense of honor?!", and so on upon hearing what the Minister of Internal Affairs had to say. The minister ignored them all with his gaze affixed towards Zanac's father.

Faced with a suggestion that had branded the suggester a traitor, his father gradually let out a smile.

"That, I especially cannot do. That would be akin to betraying the loyalty of generations of people who had served this Kingdom. How will we be able to face them then? I apologize to you, earl. Thank you for your suggestion."

"Your servant did not deserve that apology."

Zanac saw that they were communicating on the deeper level through their

gazes.

Would he be able to have courtiers who were this loyal?

His father was a merciful man, but nothing more. No — perhaps it was because of this that talented people were willing to serve him. His father was exceptionally talented in recruiting people more talented than him, like the Warrior-Captain Gazef Stronoff.

Zanac felt that it was better for him to become king than his brother, who was more likely to become a puppet of the Eight Fingers or the Noble Faction and doom the country than not. That was why he had worked together with Marquis Raeven to become king or a powerful grand duke to prepare for the future.

But now — Zanac couldn't help but feel inadequate compared to his sister's genius and his father's charisma. Even if he became the king, it wasn't likely that he would have made the Kingdom a better place.

The only thing he could do was to improve himself, but it wasn't such an easy task given his age and personality, plus he never wanted to self-improve anyways. He would probably keep his personality until death.

"—Minister of Military Affairs, I want to propose a hypothetical. What could we do to win a war against the Sorcerer Kingdom?"

"Could we form an alliance with another country before then? Are we to face them alone?"

Zanac, Ramposa III, and the Minister of Foreign Affairs exchanged gazes. Zanac, as their representative, answered with,

"We have not been successful in forging an alliance with the Council State. We had begun negotiations with them way back — just after that battle had ended. We were not able to form an agreeable alliance back then. If they knew our relationship with the Sorcerer Kingdom has worsened, the chance of rejection would only go up."

"Is that so... then Your Majesty, though this question may be out of line. What would you consider as the victory condition of this war? Do we have to drive the enemy off in battle? Or do we have to kill — or rather, destroy the Sorcerer King? If it's the latter, I do not believe that we have any chance at a victory at all."

"...Minister of Military Affairs, that would not be the case. What if we only had to force the enemy to withdraw their forces?"

"Let me think about it..." the minister of the military tilted his head as he contemplated. He came up with the answer, "luck would have to be on our side, but if we were to march an army the long way around and occupy E-Rantel while

their troops are still marching from E-Rantel towards the capital, we might have a chance to turn the tide of battle."

"We would have to break through their three layers of fortifications?"

"Yes, Your Majesty. It would be something that could only be accomplished if we were able to sneak an army that is as large we can possibly muster past their defenses — which was why I said that luck had to be on our side. Of course, if the Sorcerer King, the one who was capable of casting that terrifying spell without breaking a sweat, was to stay in E-Rantel then this plan would undoubtedly fail."

Another way to put this was that if luck was not on their side, they had no chance of victory at all. Zanac wasn't sure if his father understood the full implications of the minister's words.

"If that was the case, then if the Sorcerer Kingdom had invaded us without a formal declaration of war, everything would have been over. A surprise attack would have rendered us unable to gather enough troops in time, in which case we wouldn't even be able to carry out the plan."

It was the tradition for formal declarations of war to be passed between nations, a sort of gentleman's agreement or etiquette.

To send a formal declaration of war was to send the message that "our country respects etiquette" to the other nations. If they did not do so, they would have been viewed as a barbaric nation, which would have had a seriously negative impact on their diplomatic efforts.

Between nations of different races, this tradition was not often observed. However, even when nations of different races were involved, it depended on the age, history, diplomatic relations with their neighboring countries, and so on.

So given this context, how would a nation ruled by the undead, which hates the living, conduct itself? Would they provide a formal declaration of war?

"—My King. As I had expected, we would only have the slimmest chance of victory if we were to go to war. If that is the case, should we not try our best to avoid that outcome, by sacrificing a little?"

"Sacrificing a little...?"

"Yes, My King. We should summon that baron at once and put him on trial. Afterwards, we will have him take responsibility for his actions regardless of the outcome, and off with his head."

"...We can't do that, Zanac. To summon that baron and put him on trial would

be fine, but if he was innocent or if we could declare his innocence, I will not do such a thing. I have a better plan in mind."

"A better plan...? What is it?"

His father fell silent and shook his head.

After witnessing that, Zanac concluded that his father was probably lying. If there really was a better plan then he should say it out loud. If there wasn't, he was probably lying to cover for the fact that he had not thought of a good reason on why they should spare that nobleman.

Zanac felt disappointed by his father and contemplated what he should do next.

No matter how I look at it, the future of the Kingdom seems grim... looks like I will have to do it by force.

First of all, it was a necessity for them to pin all responsibilities on that baron.

Though the probability is slim, that baron may have been the source of all of their troubles anyways. In any case, if they could make that the truth, then their problems would be solved.

However, Zanac couldn't think of a way to pin all responsibilities on him. What if he was to kill the baron on his way to the capital and then pin the responsibilities on him? His father wouldn't be able to say otherwise if that was the case.

Even if his father objects to the plan, as long as he could pull it off on his own, everything would be fine. He had considered whether things would turn out this way the moment he had heard of the incident. He had already arrived at a conclusion back then.

The grave crime of usurping the throne.

He was so close to inheriting the throne, he didn't even have to do anything but wait. The number of disadvantages of doing what he was about to do was too many to count. The only advantage of this plan was that it solved the problem at hand.

If that was to be the case then usurpation might be a stupid idea on paper, but if he was to allow the status quo to remain as is, there would not be a Kingdom to speak of soon.

Zanac had hoped that he could at the very least receive approval from the courtiers present. There was also a need for him to request the services of that man from his sister. Brain Unglaus was an indispensable part of his plan. If Brain was there, they would definitely have the upper hand in terms of strength.

—Ah! —How frustrating! Why do I have to plan this out in the first place! If only the Sorcerer Kingdom did not exist! If only that freakishly powerful undead being did not exist!

If not for the Sorcerer Kingdom, if not for its intervention with their annual battle with the Empire, though his brother may have become king already, the Kingdom would still not be forced into the corner as it had been now.

Zanac cursed in his heart.

And then, the sound of door knocks could be heard.

Zanac had a premonition.

To interrupt a meeting this important, it must be an emergency. To be honest, the way they were knocking on the door was quite violent too.

Issues of such importance were usually — no, they were definitely bad news. That was Zanac's premonition.

Zanac, as their representative, gave his approval to let them in. A knight entered the room in a panic, just as he had expected.

"A forerunner from the Sorcerer Kingdom has just notified us that their Prime Minister, Albedo, will arrive at the capital in less than two hours!"

In their previous communications, the title of Guardian Overseer did not make much sense to them so they had apparently switched her title to that of the easily understandable Prime Minister. Did the arrival of a person of such caliber confirm his apprehension?

—No, wait.

His premonition was off the mark. This wasn't bad news — but the worst news.

So — for what purpose has she come for?

The envoy who had brought the official document was not inside this palace. Though he had wanted it to linger within the capital, they did not have the courage to let an undead creature stay with them. This was why it was currently staying within a mansion in the nobility's portion of the city.

They had stationed guards around the mansion under the guise of protection, the perimeter was so tightly guarded that not even a slime could make it out without them noticing, but the envoy had apparently yet to contact the Sorcerer Kingdom.

Could they have been communicating through magical means? Or did they plan to visit the Kingdom even if the envoy had not returned?

Also, they had not sent the forerunner before they had departed, but rather

this late into their journey. What for?

With that said — it doesn't seem as though they're here to declare war.

If they were here to declare war, they would not be sending their second-most powerful official into territories where they were uncertain of what could happen.

As an envoy from a foreign nation, the Kingdom would not dare harm her — though she might have that naive idea. However, from Zanac's perspective, she did not appear to be the kind of person to wander into territories she knew would be dangerous to her.

"Grant her an audience. Prepare the throne room for an appropriate reception immediately."

"Yes, Your Majesty!"

The knight left the room upon hearing his father's orders.

Usually, even if a foreign dignitary was to come to the capital, it wasn't as though they would be granted an audience with the King on the same day. But, given their current situation, they couldn't just tell the Prime Minister of the Sorcerer Kingdom things like, "you will be granted an audience in a few days."

"Everyone, I apologize but can you all switch to more formal attire and gather in the throne room?"

Upon hearing their king's request, the courtiers including Zanac, lowered their heads.

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The throne room used for audiences with envoys (there were multiple throne rooms each for separate purposes) wasn't too large, but to prepare it so that it was adequate enough for dignitaries was still a sizable time commitment. However, since the guide they had sent was quite slow — this wasn't a deliberate move by them to buy them more time — they had just enough time to prepare the room and gather the courtiers who were now clothed in ceremonious attire before the Prime Minister of the Sorcerer Kingdom, Albedo, arrived.

The smell of the freshly cut flowers began to permeate the room.

To Zanac, it all just smelled grassy, but Renner would probably put it as, "Onii-sama probably just has a stuffy nose." or something similar.

He felt that fresh flowers were unnecessary given that everybody was wearing

some sort of perfume, but he understood that there was a certain beauty to the sight of blooming flowers. If that was the case though, why couldn't they just use fake flowers? Well, since there was no precedent for that, the use of fake flowers could give envoys the wrong impression that they weren't welcomed there, that would be troublesome.

Every race had comparable acts of etiquette, yet the same action could be interpreted differently by different races. So how did the Council State, which was home to various non-human races, manage this issue?

The reason why this thought came across his mind out of nowhere was because of the horns and wings on the Prime Minister of the Sorcerer Kingdom, Albedo, who had just walked in.

As the Prime Minister of the Sorcerer Kingdom, the seductive beauty had a dark air of allure about her, unchanged from the last time he had seen her. Her beauty was such that it could almost make them forget that she was a high-ranking official of the despicable Sorcerer Kingdom. He wasn't sure if she had been spoken for, but she was bewitching enough that countries would go to war over her.

That was the Prime Minister of the Sorcerer Kingdom, Albedo.

The sound of men who had become instantly love-stricken could be heard throughout the room, the sound they made as they sighed, "ooooh." The nobles who had made those sounds were also obvious in their enraptured ogles.

The beauty who was able to instantly hold them captive gradually let out a smile that was like that of a loving mother. Perhaps no one else in this world could produce such a charming smile.

Though Zanac's sister was also considered a beauty, he thought Albedo's beauty could even outshine hers.

The only odd aspect about her was her gown.

If they were at a ball, nothing would be more appropriate than that light-peach colored gown, but given their current situation, it wasn't proper at all.

She couldn't have worn it by mistake. It had to be on purpose. What is the hidden meaning behind all of this?

Zanac had no ideas regarding the implications of the different types of gowns worn by women. Perhaps his sister would be able to figure it out, but she wasn't exactly normal compared to the other women of the aristocracy. With that said, her decision to not spend too much on herself out of disinterest in sprucing herself up had earned Zanac's respect.

Zanac stole a glance at his sister.

She wasn't wearing her usual gown, but the one she had worn for ceremonies. She couldn't be wearing the same clothes as she had the last time they welcomed Albedo, right?

Though he wanted to tell Renner not to wear that outfit as people would look down on her, her gown wasn't too out of the ordinary compared to what Albedo wore.

A few of the courtiers had also noticed that Renner was wearing the same gown she had the last time and bore bothered expressions, but those expressions only surfaced for a mere moment before subsiding.

"Long time no see, Albedo-kakka."

Upon hearing Ramposa's voice, the nobles who had been enthralled by Albedo's beauty finally snapped back to reality.

"Not at all, it's my fault for not visiting Your Majesty in such a long time."

Albedo replied with a strikingly appealing voice that matched her appearance. Her back remained straight and the vertical position of her head remained unchanged, just like she had done the last time around. This was in direct contrast to her gentle demeanor; it made clear her belief that humans were too insignificant for her to bow down to.

"You do not appear to have changed much, that is a relief."

"The same to you, Your Majesty."

The way the two smiled and looked at each other could lead one to believe that it was just a warm gathering of friends, and nothing more.

"You appear to be busy, so I will be direct, why have you come here today?"

"Indeed. I'm here regarding our previous affair — that being how my country's grain caravan, which was intended to be humanitarian aid to the Holy Kingdom, had been robbed by one of your own."

Though this was no laughing matter, Albedo's smile remained steadfast from before.

In contrast, his father had stood up from his throne to say,

"I see, you are here for that. Then allow me to firstly, apologize for my citizen's actions."

His father lowered his head and bowed deeply. The king of a kingdom was accepting the words of the other party at face value. In diplomacy, that was something that should not have been done for any reason. In the world of

diplomacy, where not even the shrewd were safe from deceit,[11] to confirm the faults of one's country was a major blunder.

Never mind the fact that it was unwise for the head of state to directly apologize for something, because that would be akin to the entire country admitting guilt.

To have done so would be to damn their country to the Sorcerer Kingdom's every whim and fancy. No—

Considering that we are trying to avoid an all-out war, this might not have been the worst idea. But if the Sorcerer Kingdom were to demand the head of that noble now, aren't they bound to do so?

He couldn't imagine that things would turn out this way given what his father had said earlier. If he intended to refuse the Sorcerer Kingdom's demands at this point, the one to have apologized should have been someone like Zanac instead of him. After all, the difference in the weight of a head of state's words and his son's was worlds apart.

But just as Zanac's train of thought reached that point, his father's subsequent words put him at a loss for words.

"Now then... would the offering of my own head allow for the Kingdom to receive forgiveness from the Sorcerer Kingdom?"

The moment those words came out of his father's mouth, it felt as though the entire room had frozen over.

After his shock had waned, Zanac couldn't help but feel ashamed of himself from the bottom of his heart.

This was undoubtedly, his father's trump card.

Though the scale of an incident would affect the response, if the gift of repentance was the head of the head of state, the other party had to accept it no matter who they were, right? No, if they were to make further requests beyond what was offered, their lack of magnanimity would surely draw condemnations from everyone.

His father did not consider himself unfortunate to have to offer up his life, not because he wanted to die, but because to sacrifice oneself for one's own Kingdom was for a king to insist on.

His father was a true king.

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11. 生き馬の目を抜く, a Japanese idiom meaning shrewd or fierce. Literally translates to "gouge the eyes from a living horse."

Though it was a fact that his father's weakness was in how he had dealt with matters, it appears as though Zanac had been underestimating his father for a long time.

"Of course, the Kingdom will take responsibility for the Sorcerer Kingdom's grain loss, we could even reimburse twice the amount of grain should you desire it. That is in addition to the offer of my head. What is your opinion on this offer? Albedo-kakka."

"Hmph..."

Albedo's facial expression grew heavy. Though she was still a smiling beauty, it was oddly terrifying.

"...Hehehe, looks like you've made a slightly wrong prediction, Ramposa III?"

Albedo shifted her gaze, apparently to his sister.

"Was it because you lost that man? Or was it because of something else? Did you find out about the brilliance—" Albedo then looked at Zanac, "—of your child, and so decided to have a change of heart?"

"I do not believe that I have had a change of heart..."

"Oh, but you did. If this was the past you, you would not have made that decision... perhaps it was a combination of a multitude of factors that had influenced you, but your basis as a person had not changed much? Whatever, that doesn't matter. In any case, we will not change our policies towards this matter."

Due to how sudden and peculiar Albedo's shift in aura had occurred, no one noticed it at first. She had completely forgone the etiquette expected of an envoy during an audience with a head of state. Even if she was a foreigner, this was not an acceptable attitude to display towards a king who was actively leading his nation. Surprisingly, this attitude of hers felt more natural to Zanac, perhaps because the difference in power between the Kingdom's King and the Sorcerer Kingdom's Prime Minister was warped to begin with.

Human and fiend.

From that perspective, her attitude felt the most natural.

Perhaps that was why. There was an invisible pressure emanating from Albedo that stopped everyone from voicing their displeasure.

That was only temporary, as the fiend quickly put back on her sheep's clothing, the Sorcerer Kingdom's envoy.

Albedo surveyed the courtiers who were standing on opposite sides of the aisle and proclaimed loudly,

“This is a formal declaration of war from the Sorcerer Kingdom. We will deploy our troops a month from this day at noon! However, if you were to march troops towards E-Rantel — to cross into the Sorcerer Kingdom’s borders, then we will no longer follow that timeline.”

“Please wait!”

“I have no intention of tarrying any longer. Alright, with that my work here is done. The last thing I was meant to convey from His Majesty was—”

“—You planned for things to turn out this way all along, didn’t you?!”

Said a rage-filled courtier. Albedo squinted her eyes at him. The message conveyed through those eyes was probably menace.

“You dare interrupt His Majesty the Sorcerer King’s message — human. Can you not wait to die a month from now?”

The color instantly drained from the courtier who had spoken out even though Albedo hadn’t raised her voice by much and hadn’t done anything unusual. Still, the expressions of the courtier, who had been threatened by some feudal lord with soldiers before, changed dramatically due to a stare from a beauty.

“...Hmph. Now then, allow me to convey His Majesty the Sorcerer King’s message. ‘I have no intention of using grand magic as I had last time, let us enjoy the process. That’s all.’” After saying so, Albedo had a confused expression on her for the first time ever. “Even if you say that this was a scheme that we had planned out, to be completely honest, what had occurred was completely out of our expectations. We also wanted to find out how things had turned out this way.”

Albedo appeared to be telling the truth judging from her expression and voice, one wouldn’t believe that she was lying. Of course, the possibility that this was all an act was also incredibly high.

“If you wish to treat this incident as our nation’s scheme, that is fine by me. History is written by the victors. All of your false accusations will soon be erased.”

Zanac understood the stance the Sorcerer Kingdom had adopted for this incident.

The idea that they could avoid a war was futile.

The Sorcerer Kingdom had not been seeking to expand its territories through conquest, but rather the complete destruction of the Kingdom. It was safe to say that war was inevitable. In a month, the Sorcerer Kingdom’s undead will surely

be marching into the Kingdom's borders.

"There's no need to escort me, I do not wish to take up any more of your precious, limited time."

After Albedo exhibited the attitude that told them that she had said all that she had wanted to, she turned her back on the rest of them and walked out the door.

Was it truly advantageous for the Kingdom to let her go without laying their hands on her at all?

If they killed this woman who held the office of a Prime Minister, would it plunge the politics of the Sorcerer Kingdom into chaos temporarily and make them unable to start a war?

However, one look upon the back of her dignified figure made him hesitate.

As Zanac pondered the possibilities, no one dared to stop Albedo from leaving the room.

The giant doors were shut just as Albedo's silhouette disappeared over the side of the doorframe. Zanac said to his father,

"What should we do? If we chase her..."

"Do not do anything of that sort. If we were to do something like kill the envoy of another nation, the blame for this entire situation will fall on our shoulders. Then no other nations would ever come to our aid."

His father replied with a feeble voice as he placed his hand onto his forehead, as if he's having a headache. Zanac felt as though his father had just rapidly aged somewhat compared to just a few moments ago.

"Your Majesty. Your servant wishes to spread the news that you had offered your head as a gift of repentance to every nation."

"...Yea, I will leave that to you, Minister of Foreign Affairs. If you did that... in the worst-case scenario..."

"Please, do not speak of the worst-case scenario. Will we not be fine as long as we manage to defeat the Sorcerer King's army?"

"Yea, yea. You are correct."

The Minister of Foreign Affairs' words restored some color to his father's face, but the smile he had was still one filled with grief.

"Zanac, Renner. I have something to tell you. Could you come to my room later? Now then, I do apologize to everyone gathered here, but we will have to convene in another hour to discuss what will happen in a month."

The courtiers all lowered their heads and bowed.

After the chief of the guards escorted his father out of the room, Zanac and Renner left together.

Though Climb and Brain waited outside the room as Renner's guards, Renner told them to wait in her room, so they just watched as Zanac and Renner left.

The two walked shoulder to shoulder through the corridors.

"So, sister. Do you know why father has summoned us?"

"Yes, I believe it's for the same reason as the one Onii-sama has in mind right now."

"Is that so? Is father about to show us the delicious desserts that Albedo-kakka had brought over?"

"Yes! As expected of Onii-sama, I believe that to be the case too!"

Zanac stared at Renner with his eyes wide open for a second, to which Renner responded with a smile as if nothing had just happened. This woman's such a pain to deal with.

"What do you plan to do?"

"Um—"

Renner placed her index finger below her chin and tilted her head towards the side. Zanac saw what she was doing and intentionally sighed heavily.

"What do you get out of acting cute in front of your own brother? Go act for Climb instead, he's the one who's gullible."

"Onii-sama, that was really rude of you. I'll try this with Climb next — though I did not plan to do so. Isn't Onii-sama the one who should be asked about what he's planning to do?"

"Me, I want to run away. But, that wouldn't be possible. The Sorcerer Kingdom would surely hunt us down."

"I was thinking the same thing you know?"

For a woman who wished to marry a man whose social status was far from hers and had intentionally partnered up with Zanac, that reply was too straight. Zanac had thought that Renner would be the type to value her survival more and would have planned to leave the palace by tomorrow or something. Perhaps she too understood how impossible it was for them to escape from the grasps of the Sorcerer Kingdom, and thus snuffed her desires to do so.

Zanac stole a glance at Renner but could not tell her feelings on that matter through her expressions alone.

After the both of them had entered the room, the first words from their father's mouth were just as he had expected.

“Zanac, Renner. Leave this place at once. You are only just the Prince and Princess of this country, there is no need for the two of you to die alongside it.”

The two of them looked at each other and answered in unison that—

They did not intend to do so.

The expression on their father’s face was bittersweet.

“Is that so... but, there is still time. If you two change your minds, tell me immediately.”

Though he did not believe that his intentions would change, a man’s mind was most prone to falter.

Zanac gently nodded his head towards his father.

Renner, who was beside him, did the same.

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The children, upon seeing that Brain had returned, ran towards him.

"Os-san,[12] you're back!"

"Os-san, os-san!"

The ten children surrounded Brain, nine boys and a girl. They were all orphans. Brain had taken those who he had believed to have some sort of potential, allowed them to live with him, and was training them in the art of swordsmanship.

Because they grew up in a rough environment, they fully understood the importance of violent force and were able to keep up with his harsh training regimen. Having said that, they were still just children so Brain was still unsure if they could meet his expectations. Surely if they continued to train like this, they would be able to, at the very least, reach Climb's level.

The children stunk of sweat but it wasn't offensive to Brain. After all, he would be the same after training, this was proof that the children had been working hard.

"Oy oy, you guys. Are you done with practice?"

"Break—"

"I've practiced so much—"

"My hand—"

Because they all responded at once, it was hard to fully understand what they were trying to say, but they had completed their practice, that much he did understand.

"Now then, go take a break. Remember, I told you guys that breaks are part of

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12. A bastardization of the more formal oji-san, meaning "old man."

training too, right?"

The children agreed in a cacophony of noises.

"I'll practice with you guys after a while, do not tell me that you're too tired to practice by then, do you understand?"

The children, once again, agreed in a cacophony of noises.

"Good! Remember to also fill up on water. Also, don't forget to fill up on salt just because you have been sweating so much!"

A few of the children said "We get it already" or "Os-san's so naggy" but the majority of them replied that they understood.

"Good, now go. Oh, right. Before you go, where are those two?"

The oldest of the bunch, their representative, told him, "In the backyard."

Brain responded with an "Oh," bid goodbye to the children, and walked towards the backyard.

The children returned to the house to dine on the food and drinks they had received from the elderly couple who had been expecting them and to probably take a nap afterwards.

Good exercise, good diet, and good sleep. That was how excellent muscles were built.

Brain nodded his head in satisfaction.

"You made me wait for so long."

A woman's voice called out as Brain entered the backyard.

"Ah, I'm sorry. I had to prepare in advance to accompany Her Highness the Princess on her meetings with the nobility, merchants, and so on, so I was a bit late."

There was a man and a woman there, who had been instructing the children before he arrived.

The woman who was speaking to Brain curled up her hair into the shape of a bun, apparently a hairstyle that was called "Magay"[13] in the South.

Her appearance, rather than being what one would usually consider beautiful, gave off the impression that she was icy and acute. She wasn't too tall, perhaps a bit shorter than most women her age.

The other person there, the man, remained silent.

Though he had an indifferent attitude which could make one think that he was

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13. An incomplete pronunciation of "Marumage," a round knotted hairstyle traditionally worn by married women during the Edo period.

unhappy, that was not the case. He raised a hand as his form of greeting to Brain.

He was just not apt at expressing himself. Brain had actually heard him talk quite a few times in the past, but his voice was as quiet as an ant's.

The man wasn't too tall either. He had short legs but was otherwise physically fit, but if a rumor were to spread that he had Dwarven heritage, he wouldn't have much in the way of a proof against it.

The two were both counted in the Six Great Disciples of the dojo of the swordsman known as Vesture Croff di Laufen.

Brain had his reservations on how they taught, in his mind, his practical swordsmanship training was more useful than their performative swordsmanship practice.

Compared to waving air around for a few hundred times, training with a real sword — even if it was a mock sword — was much more effective. Brain believed that his method would allow one to gain more muscle memory than simply exercising one's body.

However, this was a good way to allow them to learn the techniques first and build up a foundation solid enough that they would be less likely to die in actual combat.

It was hard to say definitively which side was right or wrong.

Though they all had gained strength, they had completely different ways of living.

It would be troublesome for Brain if the children die in combat before they even had the chance to fully realize their talents. That was why he opted to have the children train with the two, while passing down his own experiences; as a result, the children's training regimen had become harsher.

"Were their accommodations finalized?"

"Yup, they were finally finalized. They're scheduled to travel northwest — with a group of merchants operating in a city close to Council State."

The woman frowned a little.

"It's been two weeks since the Sorcerer Kingdom declared war on us, but there hasn't been news of either country's armies mobilizing. According to some rumors I've heard, the Sorcerer Kingdom only wants to force the Kingdom to back down in some negotiation and does not actually want to fight a full-on war? If that was true, wouldn't that render Mr. Unglaus' efforts in vain?"

"Would that Sorcerer King really do such a thing?"

If Brain had not met the Sorcerer King in person, he would have believed that

this was just a negotiation tactic too. But as a witness to that tragic battle, it was hard for him not to doubt that the Sorcerer King was plotting something. Perhaps he was preparing to cast that spell again.

Had Brain's uneasiness spread to her? The woman spoke in a hushed tone,

"...Mr. Unglaus had met with that Sorcerer King?"

"Not only have I met him, I bore witness to his duel with Gazef... hmmm, I still don't know what happened to Gazef till this day."

Her gaze shifted towards Brain's waist.

Sheathed by his side was one of the treasures of the Kingdom, the Razor Edge.

This was something that was granted to him when the war was declared, even though he had turned it down on numerous occasions. To Brain, this sword was too heavy of a burden for him to bear so he treated it as something that was entrusted to him for safekeeping only. He did not intend to unsheathe the sword.

Though this sword was like a hot potato that he would rather pass on to someone else, if that person could not match Gazef Stronoff's abilities, he did not intend to just give it away so easily.

"A duel with Mr. Stronoff? I..."

She stopped herself before she could complete that sentence.

Perhaps she wanted to say something along the lines of, "I wish I was there to witness it too." Brain did not think too much of it, after all she was a warrior too. To wish to bear witness to Gazef's duel was natural for them.

No, it was more appropriate to say that he wanted her to witness it too. He had just said that he still could not figure out what had happened during that duel, so if someone else could explain it to him that would be best.

"I think the Sorcerer King is plotting something, but I'm not sure what exactly he is plotting, I don't have a basis for that thought after all. My instincts are blaring alarms right now, and I tend to trust my instincts without question."

"If it's the warrior instincts of someone like Mr. Unglaus, then it just might be true..."

"I'm not too sure on the specifics... anyways, we have to get these brats out of this place as soon as possible. Even if I die, they could still make a living for themselves with the swordsmanship I've taught them — even if it's not that significant of a skill."

"...Actually, our Sensei had told us the same thing as Mr. Unglaus, that the Sorcerer Kingdom is plotting something in the dark. So, when the children are

to be sent away—" the woman looked towards the silent man next to her, "—could you request that he go along with them?"

"What? Would he do that?"

He glanced at the man who gave him a silent nod. He appeared to be annoyed, but that was probably not the case.

It wouldn't be inaccurate to say that this man was patient with children.

Though all of the Six Great Disciples had been here at some point, the one the children liked the most out of them all was him.

"Yes, Sensei appeared to have given it some consideration already. As long as he lives, our swordsmanship could continue being passed down through the generations."

In other words, they had the same thought as Brain.

If that was the case, he had no reason to reject their request.

"I do not mind as long as your end is fine with it. Having said that, I am grateful for you all. I'll go speak to the merchants who will be taking them away."

Brain heard the man mutter a few words in a quiet voice, probably something along the lines of "Please take good care of me."

Brain raised his hand as a response, to which the man responded in kind by deeply nodding his head.

"Now then, after the brats have rested up it'll be my turn to train them. Sorry to have troubled the both of you to train them while I was away."

Gratitude was the only thing that flowed out of his mouth. Even though he hadn't paid them much, they still took the time to teach the children.

Their Sensei Vesture had probably considered the fact that Brain was one who wielded outstanding swordsmanship and so wanted to introduce his Six Great Disciples to him, perhaps making Brain owe him a favor in the process, so Brain's gratitude was not that great. The Six Great Disciples were different on the other hand, perhaps they had their interests piqued at the prospect of being able to train children that someone who could beat them handily, Brain, had judged had potential, or perhaps they were just interested in passing down skills to the children that they could use to survive? In any case, they were motivated to help the children without any ulterior motives from the start.

Because he had been acting as the personal bodyguard of the Princess, he had to come into contact with those annoying nobles. This was why people as straightforward as the Six Great Disciples shone even brighter in his eyes.

"...I do have to say that I was quite impressed by how magnanimous Mr.

Unglaus really was. To have adopted these children and teach them skills so that they could survive…”

Brain’s expression darkened.

He hadn’t done any charity that was worthy of such praise.

“Stop flattering me. I’m not that nice of a guy. While it’s true that I picked these children up from the slums, it was for a purpose. There were ones that were on the verge of death yet I still walked past them without lifting a finger to help. If you want to praise someone for their charity, do it to someone who actually deserves it — like the Princess for example.”

He could see that the woman had a perplexed expression, but he wasn’t sure what had caused it.

“Are you talking about Princess Renner-sama? About how she had funded her orphanage? It’s true that the Princess had done something extraordinary, but I believe that Mr. Brain had also accomplished what no other person could. Aren’t you both equally worthy of praise?”

“Doesn’t look like I could get through to you. Think whatever you want to, but don’t do it in front of me. I’d have heartaches from the guilt alone.”

“Then I do apologize.”

“…No, don’t think too much about it, it was a joke. I’m not innocent enough to feel guilt from something so small.”

Brain shifted his gaze away from the shocked expression on her face and looked towards Gazef Stronoff’s, now Brain’s, residence.

His thoughts were of the children who had just had their fill and were probably sleeping right now.

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In a room on the Ninth Floor of Nazarick, approximately a month after the war was declared.

In one of the rooms that was reserved for potential new guild members were Ainz and the Floor Guardians. They sat around a C-shaped desk, reading through the documents prepared for this meeting.

As a side note, it wasn’t just the Floor Guardians who were there, behind each of them stood an equal number of Ordinary Maids and behind Ainz stood Pestonya. They were there to take care of the occasional odd job and thus stood

silently behind them all.

Ainz could not grasp the reasoning behind why they were silent, apparently it was to symbolize that they were tools, ready to be used. For that reason, Ainz paid them no attention at all to satisfy their wishes.

"Umu..."

Ainz read the documents in earnest but felt as though his focus was being sapped away by Pestonya's presence behind him. Still, he tried to focus his attention on the task as best as he could.

Since they had to exchange their opinions on the subject matter later on, it was natural for Ainz to have anxious thoughts such as, *how embarrassing it would be if I were to say something crazy later on?*

In any case, this was different from the documents that Albedo usually sent from Nazarick regarding topics such as politics, economics, and law; this was something that even someone like Ainz could understand.

Even with the utmost amount of kindness, Ainz's intelligence could only be judged as average at best. To ask someone to find the qualities within him that would qualify him to rule over a country would be to impose unto them the impossible. That was not to say that he was lazy, in fact he was the diligent type to try his best at everything that was thrown at him. This was further exacerbated by the misunderstandings held by the NPCs of Nazarick, whose intelligence was incomparably higher than his. In order to meet their expectations, Ainz could not afford to be lazy.

At first, he was doing so out of his desire to keep the NPCs loyal, but now it was more out of his desire as a father figure to not disappoint his children.

It had come to a point where he was reading books on self-development and business. He had also been trying his best to improve himself in combat tactics, one of the only subjects he could claim expertise in.

Though it was safe to leave everything up to Albedo and the rest, there were still a lot of things that they found to be necessary to consult with Ainz. If he were to say anything stupid when that time comes and they were to respond with, "As Ainz-sama wills, it shall be done," and take immediate action, it could cause serious collateral damage. To avoid that outcome, Ainz's personal growth was imperative.

Because of this, Ainz had taken a particular interest in this document and was even more focused on it than he would have usually been.

Ainz, upon finishing most of it and confirming that the appointed time had

come, said,

"Now then. Has everybody finished reading?"

"Yes, Ainz-sama."

As their representative, Albedo took a glance at everybody and replied.

"Excellent. Now — wait, before that. Though it has been a month since we declared war against the Kingdom, they have not noticed our invasion at all. They must still think that our forces are still holed up in E-Rantel. Demiurge, good job. Your ability to deftly manage everything so that not a single piece of intel was leaked was seriously impressive."

"I'm grateful to receive my master's compliments."

"On the same note, to have threatened a portion of the Kingdom's nobility into rebelling was also a splendid accomplishment, Albedo."

"Thank you very much, Ainz-sama."

Albedo, like Demiurge, lowered her head.

"—Umu. This current matter is of greater importance, so report to me in detail about what you have done after this."

Ainz knocked on one of the pages in the document with the back of his finger and confirmed that the both of them had understood what he had meant. He nodded in a fashion that suited his status as overlord and scanned the guardians before him. Though the maids who were within his sightline were looking towards him with serious eyes, he resisted the urge to pay attention to them.

"Very well then, let us exchange our opinions on this matter. First of all, the fact that we were able to conquer cities even when this tactic was employed pleases me greatly. Cocytus, you've done well."

"I. Am. Grateful. For. My. Master's. Praise, But. This. Was. Only. Possible. Because. Of. The. Undead. Army. Ainz-sama. Had. Lent. Me. That. Is. To. Say. That. This. Was. Ainz-sama's. Accomplishment. It. Would. Not. Be. Incorrect. To. Say. That. I. Did. Nothing."

"It is just as Cocytus has said—"

Ainz extended out his hand to stop Albedo before she could finish her sentence.

"—There is no need to flatter me. Cocytus, just candidly accept my appreciation. I have said as much, you've done a great job this time."

"Yes! Thank. You. Very. Much!"

"Excellent. Now then, we have been able to subjugate the Kingdom's cities without any trouble at all."

At the onset of the war between the Sorcerer Kingdom of Ainz Ooal Gown and the Kingdom, they had adopted the tactic to attack the eastern part first and then march towards the north. The western side of the Kingdom — where the capital resides — was not marched upon at all.

The main purpose of this tactic was to prevent reinforcements from other nations from interfering with the war, and to encircle the Kingdom by gaining control over the border with the Council State and others.

This was Cocytus' strategy, a move that Ainz himself also considered to be exceptional.

"I have found this result to be more than satisfactory — Now then, Demiurge and Albedo, regarding the information lockdown, the report indicates that it is highly likely that the plan will succeed. My question is, under what condition will it fail? Demiurge, answer me as their representative."

"Yes! We have fully established surveillance on every street, we have also sent shadow demons to scout out the neighboring cities. But, if there are hermits or druids, people who live outside of civilization, we would not be able to keep an eye out for them. If information were to leak, it would be from them."

"Then discuss the matter with Albedo, strengthen the surveillance net until those you have mentioned can also be found."

"Yes!"

"Now then, next is—" Ainz switched documents and continued flipping, "umu... a few cities have perished already, huh?"

Within these pages were exhaustive documentations on who used what strategy to completely destroy which city. The most recent entry was about a city that was destroyed by Cocytus.

"...To fearlessly attack a city with a small force, flawlessly destroy the city, and butcher all of its inhabitants. Just like Cocytus had done, the rest of you have also thought up various kinds of ways to conquer city after city and village after village. I am truly impressed."

The Sorcerer Kingdom had initiated a brutal war in which their policy was to completely destroy every city and village in their way and massacre all of its inhabitants. All that was left behind after the Sorcerer Kingdom army's unanticipated attack was lifeless piles of ash and rubble.

Speaking of which, Ainz had suddenly become more conscious of someone's gaze, which should have been fixated on him.

He wasn't doing these horrendous and ruthless acts because he wanted to,

there was a purpose behind them. *Hopefully she could come to understand it,* Ainz thought to himself.

"Thank you very much, Ainz-sama." Albedo lowered her head, prompting the other Floor Guardians to follow suit. "To meet Ainz-sama's expectations from this day forward, we will devote ourselves wholeheartedly to making improvements."

"—Ah, umu. I gratefully accept every Floor Guardians' determination and loyalty. Next is—"

That's about it, right?

Ainz faked a cough and continued,

"—but, I am concerned that none of you have failed."

Before the guardians could react with their baffled expressions, Ainz added,

"Cocytus, you tasted defeat during the battle with the lizardmen. I assume that you learnt a lot from that experience?"

"It. Is. Just. As. Ainz-sama. Has. Surmised. I. Learnt. A. Lot. From. That. Experience."

"That was what I was talking about, you learn more from your failures. No, I'd argue that there are some lessons that could only be learnt from failures."

This was true back in *Yggdrasil,* one would only think of how they could improve if they were to lose.

Job resets, different equipment, and new tactics. If one were to always win, they would become complacent, numb, and careless. They would have lost their drive to self-improve.

Though there were exceptions to this rule, like Touch Me-san.

He had not experienced defeat all that often yet continually strived to become stronger. A man who sought out the best job synergies to min-max his performance to the point of obsession, should be considered an outlier when thinking of the average Player.

Putting those exceptions aside, Ainz believed that there existed some things that you could only learn through defeat.

That was why he was hoping for some failures in their city-conquering efforts.

This was a part of the plan where failures would not have mattered much, they could retry as many times as they wanted. They had to be prepared for a future battle that was bound to happen, one in which if they were to lose, it would amount to a complete defeat. They had to fail now to build up enough experience in order to avoid failing when that time comes.

Since they were incurring a massive loss of life, it had to result in Nazarick gaining some form of a benefit. That's right, the lives lost should be used in the most beneficial way possible.

There was one other thing — Ainz decided that he should make preparations for this after he had heard the wishes of those two.

Let's go, this next thing will determine whether I've won or lost.

"The wise—" He couldn't think of what to say after that, he had forgotten the script he had prepared. "Forget about that. Fools learn through their experiences. Now I'm not saying that you are all stupid, but I am pointing out the fact that even idiots could understand the necessity of collecting experiences."

Ainz was disappointed in himself.

Why did he forget what he wanted to say during this crucial moment? Why was he this useless?

Why were those who were well-spoken also smart? How were they able to spew out the words and phrases they had learnt nonstop? Usually, even if someone were to forget what they were about to say, they wouldn't stop *there*, would they?

There was only one probable conclusion, their brains were built differently.

"...Haaah... No matter if we were to destroy the Kingdom's cities or massacre its citizens, it is not too much of a hassle given the Great Underground Tomb of Nazarick's power. But, our focus should be on cumulating experience. If we were to face a much more difficult situation, the lessons you have learnt from this war could be of help."

Ainz had experience launching attacks on enemy bases and sieging cities during past guild wars and other similar events. However, that was back in *Yggdrasil*. The knowledge that he had gained from the game must be implemented in reality properly.

In that context, the experience they had gained from the different methods they had employed to destroy different types of cities will undoubtedly be of use in the future.

The Great Underground Tomb of Nazarick had to strengthen itself. The belief that Ainz Ooal Gown and the Great Underground Tomb of Nazarick were the only guild and guild base in this world was a naive one. Ainz exists in this world, therefore there must be other Players and guilds in this world too, perhaps due to arrive in the future.

To prepare for that future, it was a necessity for this organization to bolster its own strength.

Indeed, it was imperative for all of them to have personal experiences in these matters.

Ainz continued on to the guardians who were intently listening to him,

"Speaking of our current situation, I could feel that the burden of responsibility has been growing ever so heavier on every Floor Guardian. At the same time, the number of people like you who I could entrust these jobs to are far and few between."

The Floor Guardians — excluding Victim — were all strong level 100 beings that could give Ainz a run for his money. The Area Guardians (with only a few exceptions) were all weaker than the Floor Guardians so Ainz felt uneasy at the suggestion of bringing them outside, where there could be strong enemies. This was why the number of tasks given to the Floor Guardians had been increasing.

"However, if we were to keep up the status quo, multiple issues will begin to surface. When the Sorcerer Kingdom of Ainz Ooal Gown has come to subjugate a vast enough territory, the Area Guardians will take up responsibility for a wide range of tasks. Perhaps a day will come when even the management of warfare will have to be delegated to someone."

"—That is to say that our master wishes those who are without experience to have a personal history of their own, correct?"

Demiurge started spouting unintelligible things again. But, what he said about forming a history of their own more or less hit the mark. It sounded pretty cool too.

"—That's correct. It is just as you have surmised, Demiurge."

Though he did not feel as though it could be conveyed properly, Ainz still smiled while using his practiced "What a No-Nonsense Ruler Would Sound Like!" voice.

Speaking of which, normally if he were to hear himself using that voice through a recording he would not be able to stand the amount of cringe he felt, but he didn't really think too much about it now. After all, he felt that his emotions would get suppressed quickly if he had imagined the voice that he was using.

Anyways, Demiurge's "history" idea was a good one.

They had gained the knowledge of various types of methods to siege cities during this invasion against the Kingdom, and they should record all of it down

in a book or something. With the Area Guardians as their focus, the denizens of the Great Underground Tomb of Nazarick should be able to gain some knowledge through these shared experiences, right?

Of course, as the saying goes, "a picture is worth a thousand words," those who had experienced something first-hand could learn more from it than those who had only heard about it afterwards. However, he felt that they would not be able to have many more opportunities like this one.

"Now then Floor Guardians, from this day onwards, try to come up with as many unique strategies to siege cities. Demiurge and Albedo, both of you are far too brilliant for this, so just listen and note down the others' proposals. From my perspective, up till now Shalltear has been the most creative in her strategies."

"I-is Ainz-sama talking about how I used the Frost Dragons to drop soldiers in from the sky ~arinsu?"

"That is correct. I believe that it was because I had entrusted Shalltear with all the transportation-related tasks that she was able to come up with that idea. With this tactic as the basis, we could organize — what was it called again? Paratroops? To be able to organize something like that isn't bad at all."

She had not just used the Dragons' breath for hit-and-run tactics, but to drop Soul Eaters from 500 meters above into the city. The Soul Eaters would heal themselves, then rampage through the city killing masses with their aura.

Even if it was Soul Eaters, to drop them from 500 meters up would inevitably incur some damage. In this world, acceleration due to gravity did not seem to be affected by air resistance so one's free-fall velocity could increase infinitely. That may or may not have been the case, but Ainz did not want to spend the time and effort on that kind of experiment, so he did not have detailed information.

Soul Eaters were able to activate an aura that consumed souls to convert them to HP, which meant that this strategy included a way to negate the fall damage taken by the units almost immediately.

"Though that plan was a failure in some aspects — but it was a good lesson to learn from for the future. Long story short, they were smashing through rooftops."

Aura laughed as she read through the report and Ainz did the same in his mind. Of course, they were not laughing at Shalltear's strategy, it was just something that they had not expected, but was so obvious in hindsight.

Of the Soul Eaters who were dropped from above, an individual bounced off

some pointed rooftops, flew off at an odd angle, and took more damage than they had expected. That was still better compared to the one who smashed through the roof, tried to ram down the doors, and ended up getting stuck.

Of the four that were dropped, only one of them wound up immobilized. The sample size was small, but the rate of failure ended up quite high nonetheless.

"It would be best to conduct this experiment a few more times, we may be able to gain valuable data from these dropped troops."

"Yes!"

"I will leave it to you then, choose a few cities to experiment on."

"As Ainz-sama wills it, I will draw up and execute those plans immediately."

The other details that caught Ainz's eye included how 300 Elder Liches were used to carpet bomb a city by synchronizing their [Fireball] spells and how assassins were sent to assassinate the head of a city, whereupon the invasion would commence whilst the city was plunged into chaos.

These records on the methods they had used to destroy the cities were not just useful to educate the Area Guardians, but they were also useful as a study of what strategies an enemy could employ to invade Nazarick.

Ainz sighed internally.

Perhaps the guardians thought that he was being too paranoid.

If Nazarick was truly invincible, there would be no need to do these things, but that could not be possible.

Absolutely impossible.

"—This is to prepare for our inevitable fight against a guild that is as strong if not stronger than us."

After Ainz had finished speaking, the guardians responded that they would obey in unison.

"Now then — it is about time that we begin our next siege."

Ainz glanced at Albedo — because Ainz did not have eyeballs, most people could not notice that his gaze was on them. He'd had to turn his head to face them most of the time but Albedo was perceptive enough to notice without him doing so — Albedo nodded in a manner that seemed to convey the message, "It is just as Ainz-sama has said."

"Speaking. Of. Which, Ainz-sama. The. Number. Of. Troops. We. Have. Deployed. For. This. War. Seems. To. Be. Scant, What. Is. The. Reason. For. That?"

Ainz immediately froze up.

He could not think up an answer to such a logical question. To be honest, he thought he would be able to hold the stage much better than he was right now. Demiurge and Albedo had not been raising any questions, he had hoped that Cocytus and the rest would do the same too—

—So that's why. Because Cocytus had experienced defeat during the battle with the lizardmen, I had instructed him back then to think for himself.

No matter how you look at it, the source of his misery was always what he had said in the past. Why? No, what he had said back then was correct. From the perspective of him wanting to strengthen Nazarick, his statements were fine. It was because of what he had said back then that Cocytus could have the growth that he had today.

Why did Ainz arrange for a number of troops that could not guarantee them victory? The explanation wasn't that complicated, but it wasn't one that he could just tell the Floor Guardians about.

Why was that? It was because the explanation could bring about Nazarick's downfall.

Ainz gulped down his non-existent saliva.

He had remained silent for too long. He had to say something, something that would seem to make sense.

"Speaking of which, it was the same when we were storming the neighboring towns and cities. A small portion of the people were allowed to escape, right? What was the reason for that?"

"Cocytus and Aura's questions were to be expected, perhaps there are others amongst you who have had the same questions in mind." Ainz surveyed those in front of him to be met with every Floor Guardian nodding their heads. "...I see. Well, let us observe how our first battle will unfold. Afterwards, I will tell you the reason why."

Ainz was just dragging things out, leaving these bothersome problems for his future self.

•

Situated at the North end of the Kingdom facing the Rhynd Sea was the city of E-Naüru.

It was the largest city within Earl Naüa's demesne, a city that was blessed by

the sea.

Even though it was the largest city within the domain, if you were to head east across the demesne's border, you would not be too far off from the city famous for its naval port, Re-Uroval. That city had more landmass and ships docked within its ports, the only advantage E-Naüru had over that city was probably that it had better fish hauls. That is to say, E-Naüru was of no strategic purposes whatsoever.

It was safe to say that gourmets were the ones who accentuated the true value of E-Naüru. Earl Naüa's lineage had been researching seafood for generations in order to secure the bragging rights that they had the best seafood in the entire Kingdom. Said research produced a sauce, made by mixing soy sauce and honey, used to glaze over other ingredients. Heat had to be controlled precisely during the grilling process to prevent the sauce from burning. All of this cumulated into the creation of E-Naüru style grilled fish, a story that was quite widespread.

The atmosphere of such a city remained the same regardless of the declaration of war up till a few days ago. Fishermen still sailed out to fish and the markets were still packed with people shopping for fresh fish and shellfish. Other than the decrease in the number of traveling merchants on the streets, life went on as usual in the city.

It was inevitable that no one took any special actions.

They had received the news of the Sorcerer Kingdom declaring war on the Kingdom from a messenger sent from the capital around a month ago, but they did not believe that the Sorcerer Kingdom would attack the northernmost reaches of the Kingdom. By conventional logic, before that happened, the capital would have fallen and ended the war.

There were also other major cities neighboring them that belonged to other demesnes, never mind the numerous villages within their own demesne. The Sorcerer Kingdom would have to go through them before they got to this city.

If and when the war reached them, they should receive requests for aid from those towns first. That was why they did not attempt to bolster defenses, the most they did was make preparations to send their levies.

However — things did not turn out the way they had expected.

The neighboring Baron, a few of his subordinates, and the rest of his family had hurriedly escaped to E-Naüru.

The Baron's explanation was simple, "Some undead suddenly showed up and slaughtered every single civilian in my domain."

The undead could spawn naturally and ones that could destroy entire villages were not unheard of.

But, for such a strong undead to naturally spawn took time. Excluding the Katze plains, numerous weaker undead would have to occupy a place before there was even a chance for stronger undead to show up.

If his domain was well managed, it would be easy to have the undead stifled in their cradle before they could even contend, so to speak.

Which was why strong undead normally did not appear close to human civilization. There were only two exceptions to this rule.

Either there was an evil magic caster who could control the undead close by, or that undead had travelled there from some faraway land.

If that was the case, there was only one person that came to mind.

Ainz Ooal Gown, the Sorcerer King.

They must have also received the intel that the war was declared. If they were to treat that undead as part of the Sorcerer Kingdom's army, everything made sense. Except, questions kept arising one after another.

What about the other neighboring cities?

How numerous are the enemy's forces? What kind of an undead army is it?

What happened to the capital?

Questions other than those kept on surfacing, but there were more important matters to tend to before they could deduce the answers to those questions.

After they had listened to the Baron's retelling in detail and analyzed the intel they had on hand, they predicted that E-Naüru was on the path that the undead would march through to invade the Kingdom.

They immediately sent messengers on fast horses to every village and town within their demesne, ordering them to evacuate.

With the information they had, they could not tell for what purpose was the Sorcerer Kingdom's army marching towards such a remote port. Perhaps it was because the Sorcerer Kingdom was a landlocked nation and wanted to get their hands on a port city immediately so they chose to attack such an unfortified place. Perhaps they were hoping to use E-Naüru as a staging ground for their future war efforts.

Though it was still dangerous for people to evacuate to the city, there weren't many who could outrun the ever-encroaching army of the Sorcerer Kingdom and make it to the other demesnes.

In the end, the vast majority of people chose to stay within the somewhat

defended walls of E-Naüru.

Five days after the evacuation of the citizens within the demesne had ended, they sighted the silhouette of the undead from atop the watchtowers of E-Naüru.

The morning three days after that, a man stood on the top of a watchtower.

He appears to be over forty, had a tanned body, and his scent was more akin to that of waves crashing upon a skerry than that of a warrior's. From the smell alone you could tell that he was a man whose life depended on the sea.

Though the top of his head was completely bald, the sides and back of his head still had remnants from the lusciousness of his youth. He would try his best to comb them upwards to cover up the wasteland that is the top of his head.

Though his physical appearance screamed fisherman, his garment was that of a first-class noble's; thus, one could easily distinguish his status.

"Woooah — they're everywhere—"

His tone did not match his appearance at all and was generally undignified, but this man was the ruler of these lands: Earl Naüa.

Within his line of sight was a large group of zombies which numbered approximately twenty times more than E-Naüru's defense force. The undead army had halted their march to wait for stragglers to catch up, but it appeared that the influx of zombies into their formations had abated so that was probably the whole army. Given that was the situation, war was only a hair's breadth away.

"—Even so, it's only a swarm of zombies. It's not that big of a deal."

The one who had asserted that was a woman who stood next to the Earl.

Her hair of pure white danced in the breeze.

That said, her white hair was not a product of age, she had deliberately dyed it so.

Her original hair color was the shade of gold that was a common sight throughout the Kingdom. Until the year prior she had dyed her hair black.

The dyed hair wasn't for a fashion statement or for fun, she was using her flashy appearance as a sort of advertisement for her adventurer group. Adventurers like her weren't all that uncommon, there were even those who would dye their hair pink in a bid to become famous.

It was for that reason that she had changed her hair dye from black to white.

Of the active adamantite-ranked adventurer groups there were already teams with "Red" and "Blue" associations, but recently "Black" had been taken too. Within the adventuring circles, the moment you mention the color black most

people's thoughts would naturally gravitate towards Momon of Darkness. Still, since not many people had seen Momon's true appearance, she had considered whether keeping her black hair would have a positive impact on their publicity or not. She gave up on that idea after she learned that Momon's partner had gorgeous black hair.

Consequently, her team's color had also changed from black to white. As for her, Skama Herbelot, she was just glad that they had not incorporated the color into their team name yet but had just named themselves the Four Armaments.

"Those are obviously not naturally spawned. Many of them look like farmers, so they can't be from the Sorcerer Kingdom. They must have destroyed the surrounding villages and turned their corpses into zombies. How revolting."

Skama spoke as though she was about to vomit.

Though there were also a few amongst them that had better equipment — leather armor, chainmail, and other types of light armor — that gave one the impression that they were soldiers who were turned into zombies, the majority of them only wore regular clothing, clothing that wasn't even of notable quality.

"Can someone even do that?"

"Whether it's possible to generate this number of zombies or not, I have no idea. But, since spells to create the undead exist, it should be possible, right?"

"Oh, haaaaaaaah—"

Earl Naüa sighed from the depths of his heart.

In these trying times, his voice did not have a shred of urgency. It could be infuriating to some, yet Skama's expression remained unchanged.

"If that's the case, could we not create an undead army of our own to hold them off?"

"If there were dozens of those who favor necromancy out of the exotic arcana and could use the higher-tier spells of that discipline, it wouldn't be completely impossible. Too bad there's none in this city~."

There was a reason why she was so sure of herself.

Earl Naüa had sent requests to the Mage's Guild, the Temple, the Adventurer's Guild and others — he had basically sent a call to every magic caster in the city to join them in mounting a defense, in hopes that he could form a unit comprised entirely of magic casters.

Due to the fact that the Adventurer's Guild had the most magic casters and the adventurers had plenty of experience with combat, the highest-ranked adventurer group — Skama's Four Armaments — was chosen to lead this caster

unit. For this reason, Skama had detailed knowledge of every single magic caster within the city.

"Is that so? So— everything's going to work out, right? For a hundred and twenty years — this city has never been sieged ever since its founding as a village. We really don't have much experience with that at all."

This was not something the ruler of this city should be saying right now.

Still, Skama had not appeared to be angered by this. That being said, as usual, not an ounce of respect could be heard in her voice as she responded,

"Everything will work out? I don't think so~, Earl. If we can't think up a plan about this, everyone will turn into undead~. Everybody's trying their best to help us because they want to avoid that outcome~"

"I see— why did something like this have to happen during my time. If only this did not happen for another 5 years, by then my eldest son would have probably succeeded me."

"Unlucky~. Well, you say that but it's the same for us. Why, why did this have to happen when we chose to come to this city. If it happened a few months later, we would have probably moved to another — a bigger city~"

"Wha— Hol-hold up a second, alright? Let's all be sensible. Please don't abandon this city!"

"If we really wanted to run away, now would be the best time! Take a look, there."

Skama pointed towards two undead that were at the helm of the zombie army.

They were quite easy to spot given how they were about two head's height higher than the zombies around them. In conjunction with the overwhelming, hair-raising pressure they gave off that accentuated their presence, their strength was made apparent.

Those undead carried a flag at their sides.

"The Sorcerer Kingdom's."

"Yup... did the Earl participate in the battle of the Katze plains?"

"Hmm? I only sent some trusted subordinates along with our levy. Neither I nor my family participated... but, it's not like they'll return anyhow."

"Umm... Hope they could rest in peace at the gods' side. Only two special undead were sent by the Sorcerer King who massacred 200,000 — by the Sorcerer Kingdom... Do you believe them to be weak?"

"I don't think so, sigh— they must be mind-bogglingly strong—"

"Right... Aren't you angry? That they judged that they only needed two undead

to destroy this city?"

"Nooope— Rather than that, I am only thinking of how we could be saved from all of this."

As the ruler of this land, those words were quite lame, yet, they were the simple truth.

"Though I want to send out a messenger to declare our intention to surrender, I doubt that would work at all."

"Can't you just escape by sea? You've probably prepared for that already, right?"

Skama asked what was on everybody's minds during their previous meetings, but no one had said out loud.

The Earl smiled with a bitter expression and did not respond immediately. Rather than hiding something, it was more likely that he was just trying to figure out what Skama truly meant by that question.

Though she wasn't too acquainted with the Earl, they had quite the number of interactions due to their lines of work. She knew from then that he was quite a quick-witted one.

What was unfortunate was that though the Earl's son was a suitable replacement for him, he was not as outstanding as his father. That said, there were people who believed that his son could gain a leg up on him with enough experience.

"Ahem. Of course, but we can't transport everybody out of this city by boat. Even if we make multiple runs to dump people to the nearby coasts, what will we do about the food situation? Where can we escape to? And more questions just keep coming up..."

"But if it's just the Earl and his family, they should make it out alright, right?"

The Earl pondered for a moment once more and replied,

"I guess, but that will be the last resort. 'Everybody please evacuate to the city, my family and I will get out of here first though' or something like that would weigh heavily on my conscience—"

Normally when a city had been taken over, its ruling class would either be slaughtered or forced into submission. The citizens on the other hand — though their possessions might be plundered — would just be under new management. To slaughter the civilians of a city would be akin to killing the goose that laid golden eggs.

Unless razing a city held benefits for the invaders, they would never do such

a thing.

However—

"The words of the Baron who had escaped the Sorcerer King's— the Sorcerer Kingdom's invasion to this place and the words of the refugees from my villages, surely you have heard them already? Things aren't looking too good for us."

"You're saying that there should have been more refugees, right?"

"Yes, that's right," the Earl replied.

Those who had evacuated first were here already, but there were too few compared to the population count of the surrounding area. What happened to the people who were left behind or could not make it out?

Did they not want to escape because they were now living under a utopia? Or were they under a surveillance state in which not a single ant could escape? Or were they all taken to the Sorcerer Kingdom? Those three were the only optimistic outcomes he could think of.

But, upon seeing the farmer-turned zombies, he got the feeling that there was no way the Sorcerer Kingdom would treat them well.

"Though he lords over E-Rantel, it looks as though he is still a monster who could not tolerate the living—"

"So the purpose of this war was to turn their defeated enemies into soldiers to bolster their ranks. They don't sleep, don't eat, don't tire, are fearless, and are absolutely loyal. Sigh, it makes sense why they wouldn't show mercy to their enemies, right?"

"That makes sense, for the enemy. If they were trying to subjugate a city and force its citizens to work for them, they wouldn't be doing something like this... Perhaps they do not intend to leave any of the Kingdom's residents alive. If that's the case does it even matter where we escape to?"

Was he trying to empathize with her or getting her to empathize with him?

Skama picked up on something.

She was the strongest adventurer in this city. If she were to desert this city, what could have been a victory could turn into a defeat. That was why the Earl was trying to make her think that there was nowhere to escape to.

Just as Skama was about to say something, some disturbance had occurred somewhere near them.

For privacy's sake — or it was better to say that for the sake of preparing for a defensive, the two had slipped away to observe the enemy's formation.

The ones who had appeared in front of Skama were her teammates. Her team,

Four Armaments, had four members including herself. The ratio of men to women was equal. In addition to the warrior Skama, there were also a rogue, a priestess, and a magic caster of the school of evocation. Their team composition was fairly balanced.

Behind her teammates were the magic casters gathered from all over the city.

The number of magic casters was less than fifty, but this quantity made for a more than formidable army unit.

The reason why they were able to gather up so many magic casters was because of a loophole to the unspoken rule amongst adventurers — the one about how they could not participate in the wars between countries.

This would not have been possible had the Sorcerer Kingdom sent human soldiers, but their army was comprised of undead — of which they were almost certain were the Kingdom's civilians who were turned undead.

They could basically treat it as a coincidence that this army of undead was carrying the Sorcerer Kingdom's flag.

They had to use that reason because there was no way they could use that rule to excuse themselves from a fight with the undead who could turn dead villagers into more undead.

To have formed a caster unit out of the people here meant that together they — well, not everyone was of that school of magic, so this was more of a hypothetical — could adopt the strategy of continually raining down [Magic Arrow]s on the enemy, which could theoretically slay even Dragons.

Unlike regular arrows, [Magic Arrow]s were guaranteed to hit independent of the evoker's skills. Casting it at a higher tier would increase the number of projectiles generated as well as the individual damage output of each projectile. Even so, a single projectile's damage output was still miniscule. It was pretty much impossible for them to one-shot their enemies with a single cast.

The damage output of the spell did not depend on where the enemy was struck, which some considered to be its advantage while others believed that it was its flaw.

With all of that in mind, it was still a convenient spell to use in a group. If they were to form an army corps out of people who learnt that spell, it would probably see a lot of success. However, no historical records existed of such a tactic being used.

This was because to learn even the beginner's level of the first tier of spells required a certain amount of potential, never mind the amount of time that had

to be invested to educate a magic caster. Given the same amount of time and resources, it was more beneficial to train a hundred archers than a single magic caster for combat.

If there existed some organism that could innately use [Magic Arrow] and an army was formed out of them, that had the potential to be absolutely terrifying. If not even those requirements for talent could be met — no, it was safer to say that it was precisely because no such organism existed that an army composed purely of magic casters was only a pipe dream.

Behind this ex-pipe dream of an army unit were the soldiers under the Earl's employ and adventurers who were skilled in archery and other ranged weaponry.

Which is to say, those who are gathered on the city walls were aiming to strike the Sorcerer Kingdom's army first.

Earl Naüa, standing in front of them all, raised his voice and said,

"I'm grateful for everybody who has gathered here! I would like to thank each and every single one of you for your aid."

Skama could no longer feel that sense of unreliability from his tone, all that remained was the dignity and confidence befitting of a leader.

His attitude, the product of having lived a noble's lifestyle, left Skama in awe.

"Thank us through more practical means please!"

One of Skama's companions, the magic caster, replied. A wave of laughter could be heard behind him. The Earl was not displeased upon hearing what one of the representatives of the adventurers had to say. On the contrary, the smile that flourished on his face was a genuine one.

"Leave that to me! You will be rewarded enough that even if every other adventurer forced you to take them out for a meal, you would not go broke. I will hand over your rewards in front of everyone, out in the open."

"Wooo!" everybody started cheering.

"Of course, that applies to my soldiers too. Though your pay may not be as plentiful as the adventurers', I will pay you a bonus big enough that you would no longer have to worry over your wives' and children's future! But—" The Earl switched to a playful tone to say, "—don't you dare squander away all of your newfound wealth, am I understood~?"

He could see that the tense expressions on his soldiers had loosened up a little.

"I was thinking of alternative forms of compensation. Surely the Earl has a few magic items as heirlooms or something? Your lineage goes quite a way back

after all."

The one who had said that was a woman who irradiated a perverse aura. On her neck hung the holy symbol of the Earth God, which was sandwiched between her voluptuous bosom. It wouldn't be incorrect to call this sacrilege.

This woman, Lilynette Piani, was also one of Skama's companions and no, she was not wearing that priestess' outfit because she's a prostitute who was accommodating her client's fetish or something like that.

"Huhhh. An heirloom magic item would be a tall order. It does exist though, I do have a magic item that was passed down for generations. A lot of people would know about it, it's called the Five Colors Holy Sword."

It was a longsword enchanted with the elemental powers of fire, thunder, acid, sonic, and ice which dealt their respective damage types to a slashed target.

But, the blade was without an edge so it could only be used as a blunt weapon, like a dummy sword for swordsmanship practice. He had no idea why someone would create such a sword. What was more confusing was that it did not deal holy damage yet was called a holy sword, perhaps the name was changed generations after its creation so that did not really matter much.

"I want that~"

After all, it was still a valuable item, so to give it away to an adventurer as compensation seemed wholly inappropriate.

"You want that? Hmm, depending on the situation I wouldn't rule it out completely." The Earl continued on in a sea of gasps, "My son — I wish that you could become my son's concubine."

Skama's expression turned apprehensive.

The Earl had said something he shouldn't have.

Some of the adventurers looked towards the Earl with their eyes wide open, they were those who were head over heels for Lilynette. In comparison, the one who had started this had on her eyes as sharp as an eagle's.

Perhaps that joke had crossed a line. Just as Earl Naüa opened his mouth to apologize, Lilynette asked,

"The Earl has four children right? Your wife gave birth to your eldest son and your third son. Your concubine gave birth to your second son and eldest daughter. Um, your eldest is out of the question, so which son were you referring to?"

Her tone had shifted completely. From her careless attitude back then to the seriousness that was to be expected of an adventurer. This was her actual

personality.

Which meant that Lilynette was being completely serious.

Skama's expression further darkened. She glanced at her other teammates who cold-heartedly avoided making eye contact with her.

Those cowards.

"...I was talking about my third son."

"Your third son? But isn't that kid only twelve? The one whose birthday is coming up soon but hasn't passed yet? Be the concubine of that child?"

The Earl was about to nod his head when he suddenly froze up.

"...That's, right. How did you know about my child's age? Even the birthdate of the third son of a local noble... Is that important intel? Or are all of you top-ranked adventurers like this?"

"N-no," "Um, no," and other denials came from the other adventurers. Lilynette ignored them all and continued on as she held up her hair,

"Hah, fiiiine. Ahem. Fine then, I'll become your son's concubine for the Five Colors Holy Sword."

The Earl observed Lilynette in detail and turned his gaze towards Skama as if he had a question that he wanted an answer to at this exact moment.

Skama knew what that question was, she knew it well.

"Though I was the one who raised that suggestion. Wait, why is she drooling? Is she actually after my son or the magic item?"

"It's the former," Skama tried to say, but before her words could reach anyone a boisterous voice boomed,

"You fool! Unripe fruits are the most alluring of all, aren't they?"

The silent atmosphere was broken the moment they figured out whose voice that was. At the same time, a few of the adventurers had already fallen to the ground, a result of their fantasies being crushed by the harsh reality of it all.

Skama could empathize with the sorrow of those adventurers.

Sorry, she thought. Those who had fawned over her should understand at this point why they had not been successful.

Age preference.

"I thought that you would ask, 'why a concubine,' or something."

Lilynette responded to Earl Naüa, who was muttering to himself,

"Ah, father-in-law-sama. Even if he's your third son, he was still born of your wife. If all goes well he should be able to gain the title of Baron and a small patch of land, correct? With that in mind, it would be asking too much for an

adventurer to be his wife, even if it's a powerful one, right? Though I do have connections to the temples, that is still, you know. You were planning to say something along the lines of 'if you perform outstandingly in this battle, I will consider letting you be his wife,' right? But if I was to be satisfied by the offer of being his wife alone, then there would be no way I could get my hands on the Five Colors Holy Sword. After all, the wife of your third son inheriting the family heirloom would upheave our family's peace~"

She was already calling him father-in-law.

"...I have underestimated you... If you came along earlier, I would have made you my eldest son's concubine."

"Ah, fifteen... wait no... seventeen and above would be too old for me, father-in-law-sama."

The Earl kept glancing at Skama as she tried her darndest to ignore him. Earl Naüa's expression looked as though he had just taken a heavy blow and wanted to call her sly, drawing no sympathy from the crowd at all.

"Umm, something that I've got to ask— even if it's his third son, there will still come a day when he ages past the age of 17 though!"

"That's true — if only he was of a race with a longer lifespan. But if that was the case, wouldn't I be the one who'd age faster...? So, what you've said is acceptable to me."

"You thought that was worth emphasizing?! You thought that, of all the things that I have said so far, that was the thing that was most worthy of emphasizing?!"

"Eh? Father-in-law-sama. Your composure, you appear to be losing it?"

"...You're the last person I wanted to hear that from."

Based on Skama's personal judgment, Lilynette was an honest and caring person so she should make for a good bride. However, none of that was on display right now.

If this continued on any longer, not only would it bring shame upon her companion, but it would set the reputation of her entire team on some weird trajectory which would be troublesome. Skama did not want to be identified by her white hair for negative connotations.

"...Now then, Earl. Though we do appreciate your efforts to alleviate our stress with some humor, we do have to get on with our preparations for the battle. Could I ask of you to return to the center of command?"

Even if he stayed, he, who is without any combat prowess would not be able to do much. His job was better accomplished elsewhere. Earl Naüa nodded his

head at this logical proposal, probably out of a desire to stay as far away as possible from Lilynette.

"Ah yes, now then. Everybody, we'll be relying on you all!"

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From the vantage point of the city walls, it appeared as though the enemies did not have a formation at all but were just gathering zombies into one spot. This would have been easy for a mythril-ranked adventurer like Skama to clear them out, if only those monsters were not there.

"No movement, hmmm? So — does anyone recognize those undead?"

Two undead creatures stood where Skama was pointing to.

One held a huge shield in one hand and a huge sword in another while the other one was dual-wielding swords.

The magic casters around her shook their heads after she had asked her question. Skama shifted her gaze towards Lilynette.

Priestesses were usually knowledgeable in matters concerning the undead, whether they're well known or esoteric.

With her response of a shrug, there could only be two possibilities.

One was that this was an extremely rare type of undead or a new species — ignore the nomenclature for now — of undead.

Either possibility was worrisome. Normally, it would not have been unusual for an adventurer to consider running away at this point.

The other situations in which they would consider retreat were if it had any special abilities that could one-hit knockout or could unleash fatal attacks.

This was a scenario in which they had no intel to operate on at all.

For example, Ghouls had a claw attack that could paralyze their opponents via poison when they inflict damage with it.

If one were not to know about its paralytic effect and did not prepare against it, they could get chain-paralyzed or even Total Party Killed. What would happen to a party that did not know about Wraiths' ability to life-steal? Or what about a party that did not know about werewolves and other similar monsters' resistances to any attacks not made with a specific metal? Or what about monsters who could regenerate if you did not hit it with fire or acid attacks?

Intel was both an offensive and defensive tool. If one were to fight without

any intel to back them up, the amount of danger they would be putting themselves in should be obvious.

"...This isn't good at all. We should try to hit it with all kinds of attacks to see what would be effective, any objections?"

Not a peep.

"Then, that's what we'll do — the specifics on who's casting and what they're casting, I'll leave to you professionals to discuss. Just make a judgment based on what you think it's capable of based off of its appearance. First of all, both of them appear to be close-quarters combatants."

They did appear to be that way, so they shouldn't veer too far from their expectations, right? It wasn't as though monsters that could disguise their appearance did not exist, it was just that Skama had not seen one in person yet.

"They do appear to have high defensive capabilities so it would be dangerous to engage them in close-quarters combat. We'll attack them from afar if that's the case, as is the convention, but physical arrows might not have that great of an effect. We might still have to engage them in close-quarters, so the amount of damage we could unleash onto that thing before it reaches the walls will dictate whether we win or lose this fight. But since we also have to prepare for the eventuality of the enemies breaching the walls and the prospect of urban warfare, we'll have to reserve some casters to provide buffs to the vanguard and offensive magic too."

That said, she had already warned them to stop using their mana more conservatively than was necessary.

"If nobody has any better ideas, we'll run with this one. Alright, let's start."

The magic casters began exchanging their opinions according to Skama's orders.

Skama moved somewhere that was quite a way away from where she was to reunite with her companions — albeit with a single absence.

"So, leader, what do we do now?"

Skama replied, "what do you mean?" to the rogue's question.

He already knew about the battle plans which had been explained to him, so he must have been asking about something other than that.

The question of "what do we do?" was just too vague for her.

"'How hard should we try for this city' is what I mean. Because the enemy are mostly zombies and the city won't be surrounded on all sides, if we wanted to run, with our skills we should be able to escape easily, right? Stealing one of the

boats and escaping with it isn't a bad idea at all y'know? Food has been prepared as ordered, y'know?"

"Dumbass," Lilynette replied with a fed-up tone, "our opponents are undead y'know? It wouldn't shock me if they were to march up from the sea~"

Because the north end of this city faced the sea and was covered with piers, there were no walls covering that side of the city. If their enemies were at all intelligent, they would have chosen to attack from that side. It was still possible that their main army was waiting to come out of the sea.

"Ah — is that so? That's-a, quite disturbing. Have you told the Earl about this?"

"Nope, wouldn't have helped if I did. Even if we were to only install roadblocks, the perimeter is too wide for that to happen... it would create unnecessary panic in the city first of all. Perhaps there was a reason as to why they are not surrounding us completely. Like what if they were to leave us a small hole in their perimeter and if we were to try to escape through there, it would turn out to be a trap?"

"Then what should we do?"

"If you want to run, do it through there," Skama said as she pointed towards the cluster of enemies, "It's easy to break their formations if it's zombies, worst case scenario we'll just have to scout ahead with [Fly] to make sure the enemy's main forces aren't lurking further beyond."

"I see, you thought this through, eh?" the rogue said, unaware of his two female companions' glares, as if they're trying to say, *"that's because you're the only one who haven't thought about this at all."* The rogue continued, "So if we were to run, where do we run to? The neighboring city or somewhere near the capital?"

"We'd just give up on this country."

"Are you serious?!"

"You're too loud," Skama confirmed that their surroundings were clear before continuing on to say, "...yes."

To stay and be ruled by the Sorcerer Kingdom, the country that would turn so many people into undead (even though they were citizens of a hostile state), would surely ensure an unhappy end for them all.

The question now was: where should they escape to?

Though it might be easy for them as an adventuring party to escape, the leader of the party would still have to consider various scenarios.

Three countries neighbored the Kingdom other than the Sorcerer Kingdom: the Argland Council State, the Holy Kingdom, and the Empire.

By the process of elimination, all that was left was the Council State since the Holy Kingdom appeared to be friendly to the Sorcerer Kingdom and the Empire was its vassal. An advantage of choosing the Council State was that it was relatively close to where they were, but other than that, their options were probably the City State Alliance or the Theocracy. The Draconic Kingdom wasn't doing so great the last she heard and the other countries have humans in the minorities. Then again, humans were the minority in the Council State and the City State Alliance too.

If they had to take into account the percentage that humans held in a country's population, they would have to remove the Council State from their list of countries to fall back on. She had heard that humans made up less than 10% of the country's population.

If distance was no issue, the City State Alliance appeared to be their best option. Apparently half of some of the cities' populations within the Alliance were human.

"Sigh~, are we really running away? Skama, you should try harder for my own pursuit of happiness~"

"...So you weren't acting when you were talking just then about that child?"

The desire to help and the desire to run away, those conflicting emotions grew in Skama. It was around that time when Skama noticed that the casters had concluded their debate.

"Leader! We're done here~"

"Understood! — Now then, shall we? Act according to the plan, if worse comes to worst — jump down and try to break through the cluster of zombies."

To jump down from such a height would inflict some pain even on someone armored like Skama. This issue was solved by their magic caster, who would cast [Control Falling] on her to let her fall safely.

Skama and the others moved to their post and awaited the enemies' action.

Should they consider themselves lucky that the enemies chose not to wait until nighttime to make their move?

There was no special signal to signify the start of the battle.

No statements were made by the exchange of arrows, neither side declared their justifications, just a great number of zombies stumbling towards the city walls. It looked nothing like how a normal battle was initiated.

Corpses grumbling while rapidly approaching them must have been a terrifying sight for some, but to someone like Skama this was a laughable display. If those were zombies of races other than humans such as Giants, Dragons, or other giant monsters, this would be a different situation entirely. Not even fledgling adventurers would be scared of mere human zombies. After all, this city's walls weren't something zombies of this caliber could breach.

Zombies, though they had more strength, durability, and stamina than the average Joe, they were still worse than an adventurer with even a modicum of experience. This was without considering the fact that zombies were not sapient.

While archers readied their bows, the adventurers' gazes were affixed onto those two undead beings.

They were not moving at all. Why? Were they not planning to move at all?

Eventually, when they confirmed that the zombies were barely within their range, the archers loosened their arrows at Skama's signal.

Normally, they would have waited until the distance between them was shorter than what it was now to start shooting to ensure they could hit their targets, but since these were zombies, quantity mattered more than accuracy.

As expected of the soldiers who were confident in their archery skills, they were fairly accurate even from this range. Perhaps only two of ten arrows missed their mark, which was an insignificant loss.

However, it was not as though a zombie would fall to a single arrow. Still, they could shave off some of the false life their opponents had as long as they landed their shots.

The second and third volleys started picking off a good number of the enemies.

The adventurers and soldiers did not rejoice at the sight and sound of the zombies hitting the ground, nothing had occurred that was out of their expectations yet.

Their main issue remained to be those two undead beings.

Strong monsters could change the tide of battle single-handedly.

"—They're moving."

The shield-bearing undead began moving. With speeds that were considerably greater than that of the zombies as it rushed towards the city gate. The shield-carrying undead sent zombies flying without much consideration as it charged through them with its shield at its front.

Skama, shocked by the extraordinary speeds their opponents were moving at, gave out her order,

"Initiate attack!"

The magic casters' spells flew out at the same time.

Amongst them, the most destructive was Skama's companion's [Fireball], as she had expected.

The [Fireball] flew through the air and exploded with the unknown undead at its center, a huge ball of fire emerged from the explosion and enveloped the zombies around that undead. Even if it was behind a shield that would reduce the amount of upfront damage, the ensuing raging flames of the fire should be able to swallow it up.

Various spells were shot towards the "Shield-Bearer."

Yet it pressed on as before as though it had taken no damage at all. That caused some noise within the ranks of the soldiers.

"Don't panic!" an adventurer yelled.

To the adventurers, this was the logical outcome. The undeads' movements were not impeded by the amount of damage they took. No matter how much damage they took — even if it was enough to bring a living creature to the brink of death — they could move around as usual as long as their false life was not zero.

Even the well-known spell [Fireball] was not unparalleled in its damage output. Some of the stronger adventurers could tank a hit and live, stronger ones could even take numerous hits.

Magic of this caliber was not enough to bring down the Shield-Bearer, adventurers who had not considered this possibility should have been fired a long time ago.

But, a question still remained.

Did it take damage at all or not? There was no way they could find out.

That was why Skama focused her attention towards it.

Normally speaking, spell damage could not be evaded, guarded, or reduced by physical armor. Purely energy-based spell attacks like those should be effective against enemies with pieces of armor or sturdy exoskeletons. Still, it wasn't as though monsters with magic or elemental resistances did not exist.

If she had to think of an example among the undead.

There was the well-known, super dangerous being known as a Skeletal Dragon which had complete immunity to all magic. There were also monsters that could

reduce the amount of fire damage they took or even heal from attacks.

It was not impossible for that undead being to have those kinds of abilities.

If magical attacks don't work, they would have to drastically alter their battle plans.

"It's fine! Our attacks are effective!"

Her companion, the one who cast the [Fireball] yelled.

The casters one-by-one felt the amount of damage they were dealing through their intuition and began to chime in with "it works," "we're dealing damage," and other similar phrases.

"Skama! Every type of magical attack appears to be effective on that thing!"

Skama sighed in relief at the best news she had received all day. Perhaps they had a shot at victory after all.

"Understood! Now then — continue attacking!"

The opponent was still running towards them at a breakneck speed. She prayed that they could bring it down before it reached the gate. If they were to consider that this being had no resistances, then the amount of damage that it had already tanked should be proof that it was no common foe at all.

I don't want to fight something like that in close-quarters!

As though to concur with Skama's thoughts, another wave of spells were sent out.

Many zombies had already fallen at this point yet the Shield-Bearer pressed on.

Most undead would have been vanquished after a few dozen spells.

Skama felt a chill down her spine.

It's stronger than expected... no, it's too strong... this thing, can we, really defeat it?

The Shield-Bearer wasn't the only enemy they had to be wary of, there was also the other one who was still waiting in-place. Why it wasn't moving, they had no idea—

Is that the Sorcerer Kingdom's trump card? That's why there's only two...? Or was it to say that this city with us included is weak enough that only two of them were required?

Another chill was sent down her spine.

What if the Sorcerer Kingdom had received intel on every adventurer in the city, including Skama's Four Armaments and had sent the exact number of troops to guarantee victory? And the "troops" in question were not the zombies but rather the Shield-Bearer?

As if to disprove her worries as paranoia, Skama bit down on her lips and resisted the urge to yell, “Kill it faster.”

Everybody was already focused on that and were trying their best. What kind of an effect would take hold on their minds if she, the most powerful adventurer here, was to yell that?

Never mind a neutral impact, it would probably drive down their morale.

She had to resist her urges for now.

Skama offered up a prayer to her god, the God of Fire, yet it could not bring a smile to her face.

The Shield-Bearer was at the gate.

It was now in the casters’ blind spot, where they couldn’t aim at it properly.

Skama considered if she should jump off of the city walls and run.

One look at the other, unmoving undead killed that idea.

If that other undead being was as fast as the Shield-Bearer, it could easily catch up to her.

It wasn’t impossible for her to make it out alive, she had already used [Fly] to scout out beyond the zombie army and found nothing other than those two undead beings.

So if they were to combine [Fly] with [Floating Board] or draw the enemies into the city and slip out in the chaos, it could work. As long as there weren’t any other undead troops on stand-by, nothing could stop her escape.

If they were to go with the latter plan and lure the enemy into the city, it would surely burden them all with a guilt that was much stronger than if they were to simply abandon the city. Perhaps a guilt that could cause a lifetime’s worth of regrets.

As Skama gnashed her teeth she heard the loud *boom!* from the city gate, as if a battering ram had just impacted with the gate.

They were out of time.

Skama made her choice.

“...It’s our turn! You guys keep your attention towards that unmoving undead and what’s below the walls! I’ll bait it into your line of sight. Once you could see it, cast your spells immediately!”

After a brief order to her teammates and detailed orders to the soldiers and the casters, Skama ran towards the stairs that led to the bottom of the city walls. Her companion, who still had his [Fly] spell active, followed closely behind her.

“That thing has an unbelievable level of durability, but it should have taken

quite a bit of damage already!"

But is that true...? This isn't too optimistic of a deduction, is it? But...

Skama's expression was that of a bitter smile.

An undead who had already taken so many spell attacks. I wouldn't want to buy time for a spell to finish it off by taking its attacks.

But, she had to do so to even have a chance at surviving this ordeal.

The city gate was a simple, single giant door made out of logs. It would have been a point of pride for a fishing village, but not so given the current situation.

A hit from a battering ram would have probably blown out the hinges. Because they could not replace it with something that was sturdier given the amount of time they had, they could only reinforce it with wooden planks and seal the frame. The thickness of the gate was about twice what it used to be.

From the other end of such a door, the booms of repeated impacts reverberated.

"What kind of power is this..."

With a *crack!* a part of the wood plank reinforcements began to break down.

There was a gap between the impacts, perhaps the Shield-Bearer was backing up to get a running start before bashing into the gate again.

"What should we do? [Lightning] could hit it through the gate, should we do that?"

Doors like this were resistant to lightning-based attacks but that did not mean that it would not take damage from such spells at all.

The potential damage such a spell could do to the door had to be compared to what it could do to the undead being. The benefits of casting [Lightning] now or to save the mana for other spells after the Shield-Bearer had broken through the gate had to be considered too.

No, consideration wasn't necessary.

They shouldn't be trying to face the enemy head-on but to deal as much damage to it right now as they could.

Skama nodded her head and her companion immediately initiated his cast.

"[Lightning]!"

An arc of lightning shot out and went through the door, surely dealing some damage to the Shield-Bearer.

"OWOAHWOAHWOAHWOAH!"

Whether it was becoming irritated or not, the undead began roaring loud enough for its sounds to pierce through the gate. The roar had enough

determination behind it to make one forget to breathe.

A streak of sweat flowed down Skama's face.

No shout-based ability was used, but the roar could still make one's body tremble all over, so this must be from the difference in their power alone — her subconscious had understood the difference in power between them.

Not good, this, this is not good at all... it's no longer a question of whether we could win or not. If the Sorcerer King could dominate this kind of undead... ahhh, it makes sense. After all, he's a monster who could kill over a hundred thousand people at once.

It was hard to imagine how one could control multiple undead of this level. Perhaps this undead was the Sorcerer Kingdom's trump card.

Was this city worth that kind of investment?

Why was she in such a terrible city in the first place. Skama lamented over her poor luck.

"Boom!" Another loud noise rang through; multiple reinforced logs had snapped already.

"[Lightning]!"

Another streak of lightning shone, leaving behind a white afterimage, yet the sound of the repeated impacts failed to cease.

The only thing that changed was the door. The logs had been snapped in half, the reinforcing planks were blown away, and only the twisted nails of the hinges remained on the frame.

"That's enough with the spell attacks. Could you buff me instead?"

"...Ahhh!"

Skama dodged the wooden splinters as best as she could while also moving backwards. She was receiving Divine and Arcane buffs from both of her companions.

They used the first-tier [Anti-Evil Protection] spell, the second-tier [Lesser Strength] and [Lesser Dexterity] spells, the third-tier [Haste] spell, and more. Compared to spells for countering special abilities, more spells were cast on her to heighten her body's capabilities.

The gate finally gave way after they had finished buffing and crashed onto the ground with a loud noise.

In the slowly settling dust cloud that was just kicked up, a pair of bright red eyes appeared. Unbearable fear spread through her entire body upon receiving the gaze of those ferocious eyes.

Her teeth clattered and her hands quivered. To hide this fact from the others,

she had to suppress it to the point of almost fainting.

This level of terror could not be felt on top of the city walls, it was something you had to face this monster to experience.

“What am I looking at...? Just a single one of them managed to knock down the reinforced wall... The Sorcerer King dominates this kind of undead...”

“I say this from the bottom of my heart, we should avoid becoming enemies with the Sorcerer King the next time around.”

Skama replied to her companions after swallowing a load of saliva.

Though she had already heard of how the Sorcerer King had destroyed an army of over a hundred thousand men, she didn’t feel real, tangible fear. What happened before her eyes, however, influenced her fear of the Sorcerer King who had control over this undead being.

She did not want to fight this undead at all. Honestly, she wanted to just run as far away as possible.

But, there was no way this life-despising undead in front of them would ever let them do that.

In any case, their only hope of survival laid in doing something against this undead.

The horrifying embodiment of death swept the dust away from them using its shield, stepped over the broken threshold, and moved towards them.

They had finally breached the walls.

Were the zombies too distracted by the people on the walls or had their encirclement not extended to this part of the walls yet?

The fact that the undead in front of them had scattered the zombies near the gate on its way here was lucky for them, but there was no doubt in their minds that their luck would run out soon.

Skama held up her tomahawk. Judging from that undead’s speed, she should consider herself to be within its strike range.

After activating the ability of the axe, an ethereal copy of it appeared next to her. This was her weapon’s ability, [Doppel], which created a copy of itself to float at a distance that wasn’t too close nor too far away from the wielder. It could automatically strike an enemy with the same level of accuracy and speed as the wielder.

This ethereal weapon could not be destroyed with brute force, to break it would require special weapon destruction abilities; as a result, it could even outlast Skama in a fight.

Though this ability was without any real weaknesses, it could only deal half the damage the real weapon could.

"OWOAHWOAHWOAHWOAH!!"

The undead let out another roar that sent them trembling in fear.

Was it cheering the fact that it was about to slaughter people? It raised its shield high above its own head and smashed it down at the remains of the gate.

The wooden shrapnel flew towards them with tremendous momentum but Skama waved her weapon around to effortlessly deflect them.

Her actions appeared to have drawn the aggression of the Shield-Bearer, who moved to engage her.

It readied its wave-bladed sword as it charged towards her with its shield.

This is, bad... Speaking of which, why is it still alive after taking so many spell attacks? Isn't this too unfair?

It was a flat-out lie that she deflected the shrapnel effortlessly. She barely managed to do so with magical buffs.

"Everybody, slowly—"

The Shield-Bearer charged towards them. The gap between them was closed in an instant, as though a wall had come barreling towards them, as though it was planning to use its shield to crush her to death.

But—

Skama wasn't good enough to use [Impenetrable Fortress] so she chose to just use [Fortress] instead to halt the shield with her tomahawk. The Shield-Bearer cleverly deflected the tomahawk with its shield, intending to break Skama's stance. This was a difficult maneuver that made Skama feel as though her axe was being sucked onto its shield. Skama gave up resisting its force, rolled to the side, and used the counter-acting force of that action to stand back up.

The ethereal axe swung from top to bottom but was deflected by the wave-bladed sword. At the same time, the undead charged towards Skama.

She did not even have the time to breathe. Forced to take the defensive again, Skama deflected attacks with her tomahawk and charged into her opponent.

If her opponent was this big, sometimes it would be better to charge through it rather than standing still.

"[Sunlight]!"

As if to push her forwards in her decision, a blinding flash of light was emitted from behind her.

This was a third-tier divine spell.

That brilliant light not only blinded the enemy, but also dealt damage to the undead. Although there was a spell of the same tier called [Holy Light] that would have dealt full damage to evil creatures, it wouldn't have blinded them. [Sunlight] was probably chosen to support her rather than going for pure damage.

The flying caster sent out three bolts of light towards the undead with [Magic Arrow].

Though she was receiving support, the shield still blocked everything like it was a wall and left no openings for her to exploit. Skama hacked at it with her tomahawk but it was easily deflected.

Damn it! Its movements are too clean. It wasn't this strong when it used its sword — its proficiency with its shield is too high! So its primary feature is its defenses? Hah? But, what about that heavy strike? No, impossible...

Terrified by her own revelation, Skama slowly backed off. Needless to say, this was so that the casters on the wall could have a clear shot at it. She couldn't move too far away lest it ignores her and runs into the city. That was a scenario that must be avoided at all costs given how fast that thing ran, neither Skama nor the others would be able to catch up to it if that happened.

If that happened, the defenseless city would see an enormous number of casualties.

It was better to veer on the safe side. The rogue on Skama's team was waiting at the sideline rather than helping out with the fight specifically to catch up to the monster should it choose to run into the city. That was the plan to stop an opponent from leaving, but its physical abilities made failure quite likely.

She slowly kited it while paying attention to its every move. It did not appear to have noticed and followed at a distance.

Just as they were about to bring it into the line of fire, wails could be heard from above them.

"No! The other one is coming at us! The people up there are attacking it!"

The implications of those words slowly sunk into her head. *Ah... checkmate,* Skama thought.

If the "Dual-Wielder" was on the same level as the Shield-Bearer, there would be no way Skama and the rest could handle both of them at the same time. No, perhaps they would be dead the moment they came into contact with the enemy.

"Skama, what do we do?!"

"...Let's take care of this guy first."

Skama spoke with determination after her companion's panicked voice calmed her down somewhat. If they couldn't even take this thing down, they wouldn't even have a chance at an escape. They could only hope that this thing's health had already been whittled down to a wick's length by those spell attacks.

After she stopped retreating, Skama turned to face the Shield-Bearer and darted towards it.

Her tomahawk was easily blocked by the shield and so was the ethereal copy. Skama's attacks were not enough to break down the Shield-Bearer's defenses.

She had expected her attack to be thwarted, that was all she had to do.

The real attack was the [Magic Arrow] and [Shockwave] that followed.

The spell attacks were followed up by the rogue, who tossed a bottle towards the sides of the undead's leg.

The liquid that oozed out of her comrade's shattered bottle was common glue that any alchemist or the like could manufacture. This was a strategy that could only work if the enemy was standing on polished stone.

No matter how high of a defense the Shield-Bearer might have, its ability to dodge didn't matter against a bottle thrown at it.

The undead was bound to the ground by glue.

Even if it only was for a brief moment, their opponent was immobilized. This was a common tactic they used when engaging a foe who was much more powerful than them.

Skama circled around to the Shield-Bearer's hand that did not hold the shield, the hand that held the wave-bladed sword, and began attacking.

The Shield-Bearer swung its greatsword around, expertly parrying every hit that came its way. Even though its two legs were completely stuck on the ground and she had used martial arts to chain her attacks, Skama couldn't land a single hit.

This thing, is like a metal wall!

Skama saw from the corner of her vision the scene of the undead using brute strength to tear its foot away from the stone-tiled ground. Two more offensive spells were cast yet they still failed to bring it down.

—An undying ability? Or something that could heal it over time?

There were monsters like Hydras or Trolls who had the ability to regenerate. For those, you couldn't just deal incremental damage but would have to land a single fatal hit that could reduce the monster's health to zero.

It was futile to continue on their panicked attacks.

Skama couldn't even land a single hit on it.

Gods damn it!

"—Incoming!"

Skama couldn't help but shift her gaze upon hearing the rogue's cry. Standing at the gate was the silhouette of the other undead being.

The Dual-Wielder.

Skama felt her stomach churning, the combined pressure of them all made her want to puke.

Is this where I'll die?!

The rogue who had been executing combos with Skama couldn't handle the pressure and retreated to her side. The Dual-Wielder responded in kind and moved to the Shield-Bearer's side.

"...They're not attacking. Which means... shit. These things are highly sapient."

Skama felt as though she could perceive a smile on the Dual-Wielder's rotten face. The Shield-Bearer had shown them attacks that were not on the same level as its defense capabilities, but perhaps that was just to instill despair in them to buy time for the Dual-Wielder to come.

Both enemies were there, so this was a good opportunity to use area-of-attack spells. Yet, those spells were never cast. No, it might have been better to say that they could not start casting.

The reason why should have been obvious. Though attack spells had been proven to be effective, it would also provoke them to initiate their attacks.

Their fate would have been set in stone then.

Even if their side held off on attacking, their enemy would do so sooner or later. But, they simply could not build up the courage to hold their fates in their own hands.

After she agonized over this, Skama made her decision.

"You two, run away!" She knocked on the rogue's waist, "We'll buy you some time."

"Hah? For real?! Me too?! Wait, you want me to do that?!"

The rogue wailed but Skama ignored him.

There were two opponents, if they did not at last have two people to hold them off, they could only— a *boom* rung in their ears.

"...Hah?"

The undead in front of them, the Shield-Bearer's head had been pierced by

what looked like a long needle.

Wait, no.

What pierced through the Shield-Bearer's head was not a needle; the thing that penetrated through its skull and was now embedded into the stone tile below was something about the size of an index finger.

That meant that the thing was so fast that Skama's kinetic vision could not see it flying through the air at all but could only pick up its afterimage, which looked like a needle.

The Shield-Bearer shook, its feet trembled as they stomped on the tiles below, barely allowing it to stand up. Perhaps it was only because it was undead that it could remain standing even after its head had been pierced.

Skama and the others could not help but shift their vision away from the enemy in front of them and look towards where that attack originated from. The undead did not attempt to attack them during this time as they were also looking towards the same direction.

Another attack pierced the Shield-Bearer's head again and with that, the giant frame of the Shield-Bearer crumbled.

It only took two shots. No, perhaps it was because it had already taken so many spell attacks and was already weakened. But, who could accomplish such a thing—

The silhouette of a man could be seen in the air—

"W-What?"

—Whose voice was that?

Was it Skama's own voice or was it her companions'? She was so shocked that she could no longer tell such a simple thing.

In front of them was an armored giant.

An approximately three meters tall being clad in an odd, blood-red armor flew in the air. In his hands was a pipe-shaped object which he held like a crossbow, perhaps that was what those index finger sized things came out of.

Because it had attacked the Shield-Bearer, they could conclude that it was not their enemy, even if it wasn't their ally either.

Skama and the others slowly moved away from the Dual-Wielder. If they were to be caught up in their battle, she knew for sure that they would meet their ends right there.

Perhaps the Dual-Wielder had already lost interest in Skama's group or perhaps it was because the armored giant in the air was the only threat worthy

of its attention, whatever the reason was, it did not attempt to halt their retreat.

And then, the battle began.

It was the Dual-Wielder's turn.

It threw one of its swords.

It threw the sword with such strength that there was no way that Skama could avoid it. If she tried to block it, it would still inflict a fatal amount of damage.

The armor did not try to avoid it but tanked the hit with its own body. Perhaps it could not avoid it, or maybe it did not feel the need to avoid the attack at all?

The ear-piercing sound of metal clashing against metal rang as the thrown sword bounced off the armor. It then disappeared as if it had evaporated into the air, only to show up back in the Dual-Wielder's hands.

It did not return to its hand. Rather, another one had appeared.

The armor in the air pointed the pipe at the Dual-Wielder in one smooth motion, as though that sword toss did not do damage to him at all.

The pipe found its target and then — it spat out something after a brief flash of fire and lightning.

What used to be single-shot attacks turned into an uncountable number of projectiles. *Grakatatata,* the sound of apathetic violence could be heard everywhere.

Faced with the unknown projectiles, the Dual-Wielder swung its swords. The sharp *ting* sounds of whatever was flying towards it being sliced into pieces could be heard. But there was a limit to it.

Two swords could not have dealt with the dozens or even hundreds of projectiles. The tiny projectiles flew at shocking speeds as it penetrated the enemy. The Dual-Wielder started twitching as though it had muscle spasms and like the Shield-Bearer before it, it disappeared.

The two undead beings had vanished in a blink of an eye.

Skama was truly, from the bottom of her heart, speechless.

To be honest, she had no idea what had just happened.

But Skama understood one thing, that armor was mind-bogglingly strong, stronger than everyone she knew.

She could not stop blinking.

Nothing about this felt real. It was hard for her to accept that they had been saved. Their despair and readiness for self-sacrifice were shattered so easily, her mind could not keep up at all.

"W-What the hell is that?"

"...Hey, isn't that a plate from the Adventurer's Guild?"

"Hah?"

She squinted her eyes to focus on the details after the rogue had said that and saw that on the neck of the armor — though she could barely make out its shape — was a necklace that held a metal plate. Though it was about the same size as Skama's, it looked minuscule on that giant figure. As expected of a rogue to notice something that she would have missed.

The metal plate on the necklace was of a color that she did not recognize.

She had seen the color of orichalcum before, so by the process of elimination this was,

"An adamantite-ranked adventurer?"

There were three adamantite-ranked groups in the Kingdom and the color of the armor made her realize which team it was a part of.

"Perhaps this is someone from Red Drop...?"

Upon hearing Lilynette's question, Skama replied, "should be." If this were someone from Blue Rose or Darkness, she would be ranting about why they would choose this hue for their armor.

The floating armor turned its back to Skama.

"W-wait!"

The armor responded to her voice and turned around slowly.

It raised up its left hand, straightened its index and middle finger, and pointed them towards its forehead. As if it was bidding farewell, the armor gestured at them gently.

Then, it just flew away.

Skama stared vacantly at the empty sky and asked the rogue,

"...What was that?"

"Who knows..."

She could not understand at all, but someone from Red Drop came over to assist them, that was probably it.

"But, umm, I understood one thing. If we have someone this strong — perhaps the Sorcerer Kingdom's invasion will come to an end right here. Of course, this is under the pretext that it would still be willing to break the Adventurer's Code and will continue participating in battles from this point onwards."

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He felt as though he had just heard an, “eh?” sound. Ainz thought it sort of sounded like it was from himself.

A Death Knight and a Death Warrior, two undead beings had suddenly died. The one to defeat them was also wearing an item from *Yggdrasil,* the Powered Suit.

Ainz had felt that he had lost two contacts — though the feeling was not too strong given how many connections he had at once — which was how he had come to learn that it was not an illusion.

Silence filled the room.

He felt the gaze of every Floor Guardian — perhaps the maids’ too — on him.

Ainz was the mastermind of this siege, so it would not have been wrong to view this as Ainz’s defeat.

Though something unexpected had occurred, the puny force they had lost was sent there precisely because losing them would not have been a big deal. So Ainz wished that they would not act so tight and careful.

However, given the current situation, if he were to tell them that it was fine to lose a battle, it would sound more like a sore loser’s excuse. Hindsight is 20/20, after all.

His belief that he does not belong here would surely intensify.

Ainz decided to use his long-practiced acting skills, which of course, he had obtained by practicing in front of the mirror while the ordinary maids were absent.

“Hmmm... as I expected, mmm.”

The situation was under control.

Ainz displayed the same air of arrogance a mob boss quietly talking to

themselves would have as they enjoyed the fragrance of the red wine from their wine glass.

The important part of this act was to not speak in a loud voice. A loud voice would be quite lame right now. The trick was to act as if he was just mumbling to himself.

His acting, the result of hard research, led to a ripple of commotion that reverberated around the room.

Ainz swallowed his non-existent saliva.

Whether he had succeeded or not depended on Demiurge's response.

"I. See. So. That. Was. Why..."

—What?! Cocytus?!

While Ainz was panicking, Shalltear responded, "Yes yes yes!" as both of her hands shot up. Though it appeared that she was hailing him, she was simply calling attention to herself. Shalltear smiled with pride as everyone's gazes fell upon her.

"I understood it too ~arinsu! Ainz-sama predicted that something like that would appear ~arinsu! That was why we sent such a weak force, am I correct ~arinsu?!"

This felt different from usual.

Was this a success or a failure? Ainz stole a glance at Demiurge, but he was just smiling mysteriously while nodding his head.

"As expected of the both of you."

The two of them held their heads high upon receiving Demiurge's praise. Perhaps Demiurge had already arrived at this conclusion but left it up to those two to answer first.

Ainz breathed a sigh of relief.

This appeared to be a success.

Albedo continued on,

"Intel from Sebas, Demiurge and also our corroborators in the capital mentioned how Red Drop was operating in the northern end of the Kingdom. Because of that, Ainz-sama decided to deploy insufficient troops to lure them out. The number of troops struck the sweet spot of being easily defeatable by that guy, but at the same time enough to conquer the city without their help. Sasuga Ainz-sama!"

"Like. A. Hooked. Fish..."

Eh? That was Red Drop? Could we trust that intel? What are the possibilities that it

was a Player?

If he was in a Powered Suit from *Yggdrasil,* isn't the possibility that he was a Player quite high?

Could they be sure that it was Red Drop? If so, shouldn't that intel have reached him at some point or another?

No, wait— It was absolutely more likely that Ainz had simply missed that piece of intel while he read through the documents. For that reason, Ainz pretended that all was according to plan with a burst of gentle laughter.

Needless to say, he had practiced this laugh quite a few times too.

"—Hehe. Mmmm, I did not think that he would actually show up. I was quite shocked too... I thought that perhaps they were conserving their forces for the showdown at the capital."

"Ainz-sama can always think of situations we couldn't!"

Said Aura as Mare mumbled, "Amazing," to himself.

The unadulterated gazes of reverence from those two dealt a massive blow to Ainz's now fragile-as-glass superego.

It's not like that at all.

But, he could never say those words.

Ainz had never considered such a thing could happen. Though he was of the mindset that losing was fine and winning was good, it was for different reasons than what they were now thinking of.

Ainz reminisced about the meeting between him, Sebas, and the others, the meeting that made Ainz take charge of this battle.

•

"What is it, Sebas? Is something wrong?"

Ainz had just returned to Nazarick and in front of him was Sebas, who was supposed to be on standby in E-Rantel, so it was natural for him to ask.

Ainz had no recollection of the contents of his last order to him, let alone of an order for him to come forth. Perhaps he was here of his own will, Ainz was fine with that too.

Though Sebas was stationed at E-Rantel, he was still given considerable amounts of freedom. The right to return to Nazarick at any time was a given.

However, if his goal was to meet with Ainz, he could have done so in E-Rantel.

This must have been about something important and urgent.

"I'm terribly sorry, Ainz-sama. Would you be so kind as to spare some of your precious time— or rather, could I bother you for a while?"

Ainz felt as though there was something ominous hidden in Sebas' muddled choice of words. He ordered the ordinary maid closest to him — the one assigned to Ainz for the day — to leave them be. The maid, along with the other maid who was assigned to this room, gently lowered their heads and left the room.

Ainz looked towards the Eight-Edge Assassins on the ceiling.

"All of you, leave us be."

The Eight-Edge Assassins fell from the ceiling as if they were completely weightless and silently exited the room.

If Ainz had ordered them to never speak of what was said in this room, they would probably follow that order to their deaths, but magic existed in this world that could lead someone to dominate their minds and extract information through those means. Needless to say, even though Ainz would never allow that to happen, it was still best to stay on their toes.

"Ainz-sama, I am eternally grateful."

If Sebas was the one to order them to leave, it would be akin to him saying that he did not trust his colleagues, the ordinary maids.

So, his gratitude was probably directed at Ainz's consideration to not start any tensions between them.

Ainz gently shook his head in response to what Sebas had said. To obtain the answer to the question he had in mind, Ainz asked again,

"So, what's the matter? It does not seem like an ordinary matter. An emergency perhaps?"

"Yes— ahem, no. I am not too sure if this counts as out of the ordinary or not... Someone wishes to converse with Ainz-sama in private... I was requested to ask for Ainz-sama's presence at their behest."

"So they wish for me to go to them? They couldn't come to my room?" Given that Ainz was the Supreme Overlord of the Great Underground Tomb of Nazarick, this was an uncommon request. "...This is not about that human, is it?"

"No, it was not Tsuare. It was a guardian who had not received permission to leave their area. They knew that this would be disrespectful, but they still wish to trouble Ainz-sama for a while..."

Sebas looked towards Ainz with an apologetic expression.

"Ahhh, I see." Ainz understood.

If it was an Area Guardian, then it all made sense.

Of course, if he ordered them to come over they would most likely do so. Some NPCs might respond in the negative due to a previous order from Ainz's allies, who were their creators and whom they referred to as the Forty-One Supreme Beings. Still, most would obey Ainz's order.

There were also those who simply could not be allowed to leave.

A good example of which would be one of the Area Guardians on the Seventh Floor, Guren.

Because of its passive aura, it would surely cause a lot of collateral damage just by moving to the Ninth Floor. Things like wool carpets catching fire would be fine, but if it were to cross paths with beings like the ordinary maids, they would surely take a lot of damage.

If that was the case, it was better for Ainz to go to it than the other way around. Ainz had never liked putting on airs anyway. In addition, he did not have any tasks on hand that must be dealt with immediately. At least that was what Ainz thought.

"Understood. I will go to them. So, who am I looking for?"

"It was Nigredo-sama and Pestonya."

Sebas was one to refer to everybody else with the honorific "-sama" yet he did not do so with Pestonya, was it because they were colleagues?

"It was those two..."

Ainz's expression became dejected and he tried his best to hide that fact. Though Ainz's skeletal face could not show any expressions, it appeared as though a select few of the guardians could actually cold-read him. Albedo was one of them. As a side note, Demiurge would apparently always interpret his expression in weird ways.

Was it on purpose?

Ainz had thought that he had hidden his emotions well enough but it seemed like Sebas could still pick up on a few hints that slipped out of his vocal mannerisms. Sebas' expression had become more and more apologetic as a result.

Though I feel sorry for Sebas... but honestly, I don't want to go~

Nothing good will come of this.

He could confidently state that.

Imagine if you were in an office and someone told you, "The people from that

other department are looking for you. They don't want to call you but want you to go to them directly." Eight or nine times out of ten it would be about a hassle.

That said, it was not as though Ainz had a choice in this matter. If a larger issue rose up because he had neglected the smaller issues, the responsibility for the consequences would ultimately fall upon him.

While it was true that Ainz was the absolute overlord of Nazarick, for him to rest on his laurels would be moronic.

Ainz wanted none of the NPCs to dislike him, but rather, he desired that they would adore him just as he doted on them as if they were his children.

"...Let us proceed. As for my schedule..." Ainz pulled out a notebook to check what he had scheduled for today. He was someone who would put off tasks that he found to be annoying yet was also someone who would wish that said annoying affairs would be resolved as soon as possible. "This time slot is fine, it's empty. Can we go there right now?"

Nigredo and Pestonya. Though both of them were Area Guardians, with what Sebas had just stated, Ainz knew exactly where they were going. That was why he could still convey his intentions to Sebas even with these half-questions.

"If we were to allow Pestonya to arrive there first, how about an hour later?"

"...That's fine. Looks like — it would be inappropriate to bring Albedo and Demiurge along."

"Yes. Though it pains me to say this, they hoped that Ainz-sama would be going there alone."

Ainz nodded his head.

"What about that doll?"

"I will ask Pestonya to take care of that matter, there should not be any problems."

"Good. An hour later then... hmm? Sebas, will you be going too?"

"Yes. I had hoped that you would grant me permission to. Am I allowed to?"

Sebas' lowered his head of white upon receiving Ainz's approval.

An hour later, Ainz used the power of the ring to teleport to the Frozen Prison on the Fifth Floor.

No one was accompanying him. He had told the ordinary maid assigned to him that he had important matters to attend to and had ordered her to keep the secret and stay behind.

At first she had protested by saying, "I will pretend that I saw nothing at all. You could just ignore my presence entirely, so please take me along with you."

While Ainz did find her suggestion to be trustworthy, she did appear to derive some form of fulfilment from being ignored.

He had talked this over with her in the past and her response was that for him to objectify them, would have meant that they had accomplished their duty as maids to the utmost. They were apparently also actively seeking that kind of interaction. Then again, he had only asked one of them so perhaps she was the only one — no, she had to be the only one with such a fetish.

Even if it were an ordinary maid like her, to guarantee that he did not risk even a 1% probability that this could snowball into something bigger, Ainz steeled himself.

I should do something that'll make her happier when I get back... maybe assign her to some bothersome and menial task... so that she'll be happy or whatever. Yeah, I don't get it at all...

There were just too many people in Nazarick who behaved like this maid, that was why none of his long-term vacation and paid-leave policies ever took off. If this persisted, Ainz's hopes and dreams were all doomed to fail.

Ainz pushed open the fairy-tale-esque, chateau-style layered frozen doors. Just as before, a chilly breeze flowed out from within, but Ainz, as an undead with complete immunity to freezing temperatures, was not bothered by it anyway.

Ainz walked alone through the gloomy corridors. Other than checking for holes in the ceiling as he walked, he strode non-stop to a door that stood as the centerpiece of a giant mural which spanned the entirety of the wall.

Just as before, the plaster on select spots of the mural had already fallen off. It looked quite miserable.

The door took a single push and silently slid open; the three occupants of the room stood up to greet Ainz.

The owner of the room, Nigredo.

The dog-headed maid, Pestonya.

And the last of the trio, Sebas.

"Welcome, Ainz-sama."

With the room's owner, Nigredo's invitation, Ainz approached the table at which they sat.

The last time he had been in this room, all it had was a cradle. This time the cradle was nowhere to be seen, just a table and four chairs.

Those were probably appropriated from other rooms within the Frozen

Prison. As a side note, Nigredo was only the Area Guardian of the above-ground portion of the Frozen Prison, Neuronist was the Area Guardian of the underground portion.

After Ainz had taken his seat, Pestonya immediately began to prepare some tea. The steam emanating from the teacup in front of him carried with it the aroma of the black tea held within. Sebas brought out some biscuits at the same time.

Of course, Ainz could not consume anything with his body, but he gladly accepted their hospitality anyways. After that, Ainz ordered the still-standing three of them to sit down.

The biscuits that were delivered to Ainz were not sophisticated at all; they were just plain squares. That could be said to be a rare sight in Nazarick.

Was this someone's experiment? Ainz looked towards Sebas and asked about them through his gaze alone, prompting Sebas to reply,

"Those are not from Nazarick, but goods I had brought back from E-Rantel. Due to the current abundance of cheap and fresh ingredients being brought into the city, a food culture is slowly developing there. This biscuit is among the foods being developed. It was previously said to be quite hard, but it has now been refined to its current softness."

"I've tried some already, it's at an acceptable level of quality for a snack, woof."

"Hmmm."

Ainz took a biscuit and bit down on it. Indeed, it was not as tough as he had expected.

The biscuit snapped in half as Ainz caught the crumbs from the inside of his jaw cavity and placed the pieces next to the cup of black tea.

He could tell the texture of the biscuit, but not its taste. What a disappointment of a body.

However, from Ainz's perspective it was not so at all. It was specifically because of the fact that this body had no libido, appetite, and somnolence that he could succeed in his role as the ruler of Nazarick.

If one of those aspects were to apply to him, surely he would have been in an endless fall from grace since the beginning.

"If Ainz-sama was to rent out more of his undead for agricultural purposes, then there would certainly be developments in the improvements of breeds of food. The food culture would surely blossom and perhaps they could even

produce food of an equal quality compared to Nazarick's offering."

"That would be great. Because of my body, I could not investigate the buffs incurred by different food items before. If we were to invest more resources into this, it could help strengthen Nazarick. But — if that was the case, I assume those without Cook levels can't cook at all then?"

"We were concerned about that too, so it would be best to save as many purebreds as we possibly could."

Ainz nodded in approval in response to Nigredo's suggestion.

Suddenly, Ainz was reminded of the European biodomes of the past and the conflicts that arose surrounding the seed banks. Though he was not too interested in the topic back then, Blue Planet was all riled up over it.

"Ah, yes. It would be best. A task force should be formed to handle this matter." He should probably propose this idea to Albedo. "Now then — it's about time that we address the main topic at hand. Tell me. Why was I summoned here?"

Nigredo, as their representative, spoke,

"Yes. Given the current situation, isn't it about time that we stop massacring the citizens of the Kingdom?"

"Negative. Anyways, should this not be something that you ask of your direct superiors, the Floor Guardians, rather than me?"

Ainz replied immediately.

The denizens of Nazarick — especially the Area Guardians — had been informed, in writing, the actions of Floor Guardians and the goals behind them.

If they had any suggestions, they should be reporting to their superiors, the Floor Guardians. This was to unify the various denizens of Nazarick, to gain the opinions of those with different points of view and to pique the interest and curiosity of them all.

However, though Nigredo was stating her opinions just as he had hoped they would, she should have done so to her direct superior, the Floor Guardian of the Fifth Floor, Cocytus. If Ainz was to accept her suggestion directly, it would be detrimental to Cocytus' authority.

As a social conformist, he absolutely could not do that.

If some of you do not understand, do try skipping your own superior and petitioning a higher-up from another department if you will. Do you understand now? Nothing good would come of that.

From that perspective, Ainz, as the head of the board of directors — the

company hierarchy analogue to Guildmaster — should be able to do so, but to rouse discord among his subordinates could ultimately lead the company into a difficult situation and thus should be avoided at all costs.

If it were in the stead of the Floor Guardian of the Fourth Floor, Gargantua, instead, Ainz would be willing to do so.

"Ainz-sama is correct. So, do permit me to raise this suggestion too, woof."

In a sense, Pestonya's direct superior would be Sebas.

If a Floor Guardian were to be assigned to the Ninth and Tenth Floors, Sebas would be the Floor Guardian of the Ninth and Albedo would be the one for the Tenth.

Because Sebas had been the one to have invited Ainz, there should not be an issue with indignity at all.

"—I see, I understand your feelings now, but I do want to ask one question. This war is a massive experiment for the greater good of strengthening the Great Underground Tomb of Nazarick, our home. It would not halt just by the grace of mercy alone. So, was your suggestion built upon this premise?"

Make no mistake, the Great Underground Tomb of Nazarick — the Sorcerer Kingdom of Ainz Ooal Gown is not unique, nor is it invincible. If they were to encounter another guild that was also transported to this world, they could lose.

To assume that they were the only ones to have transported here... would be far too optimistic.

To be honest, he had already felt the presence of other World Class Items, so it was not a far stretch of the imagination to assume that some other guild existed elsewhere.

This was why, to guarantee victory for an inevitable guild war, it was his duty as the Guildmaster to strengthen Nazarick as much as he could.

"By what grace may they be spared if it is not by mercy alone? Woof."

"...Uh. What do you mean? If there are any benefits to be reaped from your suggestion, do tell. That said, if it is something along the lines of 'if we spare as many people as possible, a strong being may be born in the future' I will not entertain it. Throughout the Kingdom's history, it has produced nothing stronger than adamantite-ranked adventurers. In terms of pure power alone, perhaps this was humanity's limit. If that was the case, it's better to give preference to Dragons or other stronger races."

"All infants have potential, Ainz-sama."

Pestonya gave Nigredo a cold-eyed — at least he thought it was — glare.

“Not just the infants, woof.”

Nigredo had a soft spot for babies, perhaps even surpassing that of Pestonya’s. However, her compassion is limited to only that of infants. Once they live past the age of two, she sees them as nothing but sacks of meat to be disposed of.

For that reason, the toddlers that had been saved during the assault on the capital had left Nigredo’s care and were placed under Pestonya once they were two years old.

They were probably transferred to Yuri’s orphanage by now.

“I see, that is true. But, isn’t the same true for dragonlings too?”

“What we had just talked about, improving the breeds of food, doesn’t that apply to humans too? If we were to apply the different techniques we have in Nazarick to strengthen them, surely stronger varieties of humans could be made. Plus, a race’s value is not just in their strength, humanity’s propensity for creativity in their creations... you could call it the ability of cultural development, I believe they do have that ability. If we were to reduce their population to nothing, isn’t that a great opportunity cost to Nazarick?”

Was that why they had given Ainz the biscuits? If that was the case, everything had been playing out the way they had intended for it to. No, that did not matter much. As long as they could convince Ainz, it would be their victory.

“Indeed, that is worth considering. However, I do not wish for the inhabitants of this world to become too strong, even to the extent that I believe their development of civilization to be a threat.” Ainz curled his hand into a fist. “Those who are strong but could not get stronger and those who are weak but still have room for growth, a turn of tides must be avoided at all costs. Once we discover the slightest possibility of that happening, we must prevent it at all costs. This is all for Nazarick’s good... isn’t it?”

The two of them fell silent. Ainz shifted his gaze onto Sebas.

Sebas had not spoken since then.

“I’m grateful that Ainz-sama was willing to come down here and lend an ear to their thoughts. That is why I will not be making any further requests.”

“Hmmm...”

Ainz cupped his chin and turned his gaze back on to the two of them.

“Mmmm, it is true that it would be disadvantageous for us to push humanity to the brink of extinction. When push comes to shove, they would do anything to become stronger out of desperation. For that reason, it is best for us to wipe out all who have had that kind of experience. If you want to nurture them,

nurture the ones who have not gone through those kinds of experiences — those without the drive to strengthen themselves." Ainz alternated his gaze between the two of them. "Are we done here? Shall I return to my room?"

"Not yet, woof!"

Pestonya's voice was a bit too loud. She lowered her head in shame and said, "I'm very sorry."

"It's fine. Rather than apologizing, do speak your mind."

"Yes — Ainz-sama. I heard that your strategy this time around was called Candy and Whip, to let the countries around us know the difference in outcome between the Empire who chose to become our vassal and the Kingdom who chose to oppose us as enemies. Was that the reason for the current massacre, woof?" Pestonya continued after Ainz had nodded, "As more and more people manage to escape through great tribulations, wouldn't the perception of how foolish it is to disobey Ainz-sama, or rather the Sorcerer Kingdom, become more widespread? ...Uh, woof."

"You're suggesting that I should intentionally let more of them go because of that?"

"Yes, woof."

If that was the case, there was some value in allowing them to escape.

But.

He did not believe that Albedo and Demiurge had not given consideration to this already. Both of them were the type to not execute a plan until they had thought of even these kinds of possibilities. If Ainz were to allow that, he would be executing a plan that Albedo and Demiurge had abandoned for some reason.

How would those two, who always mistook Ainz's actions to be that of a genius', react to this?

Ainz's non-existent stomach cramped up the moment he thought about this.

Wait no, he had told them that, "I will be making mistakes intentionally," so even if something out of the ordinary happened, it could still work out fine at the end. However, the real issue lay in what would happen afterwards, specifically the actions of those who would call the color white as black and vice versa if he did it first.

If they gave up on the plan due to a fatal flaw and I ordered them to carry it out anyways, it could lead to massive losses on our side.

It would be the same as a company that experienced massive losses due to the CEO's incompetence while the employees were helpless to stop it from

happening.

Even if they were to recover the loss, someone like me would be too meek and powerless to do anything about it. Someone who couldn't even shoulder the responsibilities and consequences of their actions shouldn't be doing something like this.

But even if he wanted to reject it, he could not put his finger on exactly what was wrong with Pestonya's suggestion.

Even though a simple "no" would have probably sufficed.

...So I should have forcefully brought Albedo and Demiurge along, huh? But...

He had not done so because he had more or less figured out what this meeting would be about after learning that it was with Nigredo and Pestonya.

This was why it had turned into a difficult situation.

Because, those two had been imprisoned before.[14] Back then, Albedo had already suggested executing them. He was afraid that if the same thing were to occur again that Albedo would strongly request execution. He was also afraid of a future irreconcilable division.

An organization that seemed formidable to outsiders could still crumble down from the inside.

That was why they had to avoid anything that could pose a threat to them.

So then, what should he do now?

His common sense told him to reject their suggestion but something still troubled him: the future.

Though the Great Underground Tomb of Nazarick would only accept one set of outsiders into their ranks, the Sorcerer Kingdom of Ainz Ooal Gown had already absorbed a large number of outsiders. Though they may not hold any important posts within the organization, that was probably only a temporary measure.

If those outsiders were to become high-ranked officials, they would certainly hold quite a lot of different opinions. Perhaps there would also be suggestions for benevolence that would make Albedo and the rest call them "weak-willed" or something similar.

Would it be possible to task Nigredo and Pestonya with integrating those kinds of opinions?

If that were the case, ignoring their suggestions now could lead to problems later on.

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14. See Overlord Compilation Movie 01 Bonus *The Pleiades Day*, "Part 1."

If people with similar opinions as them were the exception in Nazarick, then he should divert even more attention towards this issue.

Also—

I have already repaid the kindness Touch Me-san had shown to me, so if I was to consider this as repaying Mochi-chan and Tabula-san's kindness, this should be fine.

"...Though I believe that all of you should know this by now, I'll repeat it again: I never intended to wipe out every single human from the Kingdom. The truth is, we have already convinced multiple nobles to join our side... at most, only around 90% of them will be killed."

"So some people chosen to be spared will live under the Nazarick's rule, woof. I don't believe that would advertise the message louder than if we were to let the unchosen ones escape."

He could understand Pestonya's will to help those who had not been chosen by them.

"I completely understand what you're trying to say. If it is not out of mercy, but rather for the greater good of Nazarick, there is room for consideration... I'll consider letting a few of them go."

"We're eternally grateful."

"We're eternally grateful, woof."

Sebas silently lowered his head as well.

Still, though he had said that, he did not know exactly how he should go about this. Ainz's heart grew heavy.

He had to think up a solution. Perhaps he only needed to let a few hundred people go to appease them.

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Though this was completely unexpected, it was true that the vast majority of the city's population had survived. As long as he allowed them to escape, he would have fulfilled his promise to those two. That said, it would not count as the survivors escaping through great tribulations.

Should he send stronger undead to try again?

No, there was something he had to confirm before then.

"Ahem! Now then, Albedo. Though you have said that this was Red Drop, how trustworthy is our intel source on this one?"

“I am terribly sorry, Ainz-sama. Indeed, we do not have concrete proof of that claim. This was only a surface-level deduction based on the adamantite plate on the armor as well as its color.”

Albedo stood up and bowed deeply.

“At ease. I just wanted to check if you had access to intel that I did not. I am not too bothered by it.”

While he was happy that she was this loyal, being treated like that usually made him quite uncomfortable. To Ainz, the manifestation of the concept of failure, this was not that big of a deal. However, it was not as though what she had just described could be categorized as a failure anyways.

“You have my eternal gratitude, Ainz-sama.”

“Umu... So was that Red Drop, or a plot by someone who wants us to believe that they are Red Drop? Floor Guardians, speak your mind.”

From their brief opinions, most of them supported the former. Ainz thought it was the former too.

“Now, then — I must ask something of everyone once again. Does anyone know of the specs of a Powered Suit? If you are all not too sure of it, I will explain.”

Ainz confirmed that the guardians knew not of the Powered Suit and began to exposit what he remembered of the Powered Suit’s abilities.

Back in the game of *Yggdrasil*, the Powered Suit did not exist initially but was added in later on as an item for newly registered Players to power-level with.

Also, mecha fighting games were popular back then, so it must have also been an attempt to draw in players from that player-base as well.

Though he could not tell whether that contributed to this fact or not, the Powered Suit’s capabilities were quite high.

First of all, just as they had seen, the suit had the ability to fly through the air at a greater speed than [Fly]. It could maintain operations for over an hour underwater without any detriments and was essentially immune to almost all environmental damage.

It could even apply and activate with its shoulders, torso — and depending on the type, even the wrists and feet — different kinds of offensive spells.

Though this might seem obvious, it does have human finger-like appendages that could — if the hand had not been transformed into a weapon itself — hold weapons.

The magical armaments could be freely customized within the Powered Suit’s

settings, but half were microtransaction exclusives while the other half required grinding.

Though those customizations could be performed pretty much anywhere outside of combat, there were still some restrictions on them.

The highest tier of spells that could be stored on the armor was the tenth tier and the use of said spell was subjected to a limit of one use per hour. Stronger spells had even more limited uses. Though the number of times a spell could be used recovered over time, it appeared to have a restriction by which the spell stored on it could not be swapped out for a duration even if it was only expended by a little.

The armor's physical and magic damage were high-tier, independent of the user's abilities. The same was true for its defensive and evasive capabilities.

You could call it an armor that instantly closed the gap between the weak and the strong.

Speaking of weakness, it did have two minor ones.

One of which was the fact that because it counted as Full-Body Armor, it could not be combined with other pieces of armor. Still, necklaces and other decorative equipment could still be worn with it.

Another was the fact that the magic stored in the armor could not have metamagic applied to it. But, since those spells could still be enhanced through equipment, this could not really be considered a weakness at all.

However, if a weakling were to use it, it did have a major weakness.

HP and MP.

Though the damage output of the suit could compensate for the wearer's low stats, the HP and MP values of the wearer remained unaltered by the armor.

That is to say, a weakling in the armor would have high defensive capabilities but also a frail health pool. Of course, if their opponent could not break through the armor's relatively high defenses, it was not a weakness at all.

In Nazarick's terms, a Floor Guardian should not have an issue fighting it at all.

The threat it posed was to NPCs like the Pleiades, who were not that strong. If they crossed paths with the suit, they should choose to retreat.

Ainz concluded his explanation and started taking questions.

The first to ask a question was Albedo.

"So as long as we are the ones handling it, it should be fine, correct?"

"Correct. Even the strongest Powered Suits could only have the offensive

capabilities equivalent to level eighty characters. However, that hinges on my knowledge on the Powered Suits being perfect. Hypothetically, if there were rarer or Artifact grade Powered Suits, it would be a completely different situation. If that were the case, there could be Powered Suits much more powerful than the ones I have described."

"Can you not tell from its appearance alone?"

"Umu, I apologize, Aura. Because I am not too familiar with Powered Suits in the first place, I cannot tell its capabilities just from appearances alone. Also, though one would not be allowed to alter its appearances by too much, there were still slight alterations the wearer could make to it."

While the Powered Suit might be useful to weaker Players, it was completely useless to a stronger Player.

Never mind Divine grade gear, even Legendary grade equipment matching a Player's strengths could outperform the Powered Suit. That was why when Powered Suit was introduced to *Yggdrasil*, Ainz and his friends, who were already at max level, were not interested.

The greater issue to Ainz back then was that he could barely cast spells with it equipped.

"Were there two or three? There should be a few sets of Powered Suits in Nazarick, I will head to the Treasury later for them. Maybe everyone should get a feel of what it is like to wear one."

He remembered that the thing should still be there, something that Amanomahitotsu had procured after learning that even those with manufacturing-based job levels could enter combat with them. Apparently he was secretly quite confident because he also played aerial combat games, but then he got easily wrecked by Peroroncino in a mock battle. The thing was never seen again after that.

He also remembered how Nishikienrai had said, "Just play Aberage instead lmao."

Ainz was journeying through his memories when he realized.

If Red Drop had a Powered Suit from *Yggdrasil* — the black sword of the leader of the other adamantite-ranked team, Blue Rose, could be of a similar power level.

According to the intel they had gathered from their aides in the capital, the weapon she wielded was said to be powerful enough to level an entire city. Though that aide found the intel to be preposterous, it did originate from a

member of the team itself.

Ainz always thought that she was either lying to her teammates, or just making things up.

But given what he knew now — perhaps, that intel was true.

He had heard that the leaders of Blue Rose and Red Drop were relatives.

If they were related, then having the same level of equipment should not be weird at all.

Of course, Ainz was not paranoid enough to believe that the Floor Guardians could be one-shot by anything, but he also had no proof that it was a complete impossibility. Perhaps the guardians' defenses could be easily breached by some strong weapon from this world.

Ainz did not want to suffer any severe consequences for forcing his opponent to the stage where she would be suicidal enough to use that sword's power.

If it came down to a battle with Blue Rose, he should probably use summoned monsters to bait out that ability and then defeat them.

However, that would be the last resort.

He remembered a saying about how "The better part of valor, is discretion," he should follow that advice.

After all, the primary purpose of the Kingdom's destruction was not the termination of Blue Rose, but if they were to get in his way, he would not mind killing them off. That said, it was best not to make any rash movements before they knew the full capabilities of that woman's sword.

I should say sorry to Entoma and hope she understands.

Ainz mentally sighed to himself as he shook his head in an attempt to get his train of thought back on track.

This was not the time to be thinking about these sorts of things.

"Any other questions?"

Ainz looked around, it appeared that none of the guardians had any other questions.

"If that is the case, we will pause the discussion on the Powered Suit for now. Now then, Demiurge, how shall we deal with this city? In my opinion, to have baited that thing out was more than satisfactory."

"It would be bad for them to mistake that they had defeated the Sorcerer Kingdom. We should send a stronger entity and unto dust they shall return."

"Hmmm, that is fine too..."

No, that was not fine at all.

If they did that, he would have to try extra hard to save some other city to keep the promise he had made to those two. Though he made it through this time, to accomplish it again would be extremely difficult.

For Pestonya's sake, who had been standing behind him and listening in, he had to save the people of this city to fulfill their promise.

"No, Demiurge. Let us not do that for now. This will prepare us for similar situations should they occur again. In any case, it is about time that we siege the capital. Let us close the curtains on this battle. We will be fine as long as we systematically scorched-earth the rest of the cities. What do you think?"

He was giving this city's inhabitants the chance and time to run away. If they get killed afterwards because they did not escape, those two should not have a problem with it, right?

"If Ainz-sama deems it so, so be it."

Though it might seem as though Demiurge was being sarcastic, he was not one to do such a thing to Ainz.

Some people could always hear all sorts of undertones in other people's words, those who usually have something to hide themselves, Ainz being one of them.

"Don't say that, Demiurge. If you have a better idea then that should be the one that we should implement."

"As expected of Ainz-sama. I am truly in awe of how humble you are."

Ainz's opinions of the bowing Demiurge became muddled.

First of all, what he had said was common sense, it was nothing worth praising.

Though he was flattered, he felt as though he was being treated more like a child if even the most trivial of the things he had said and done was cheered.

Perhaps that was just out of his low self-esteem.

"...Do any of the other guardians have different opinions?" Ainz turned to Shalltear upon confirming that there were no objections, "Bring back the undead we had sent using [Gate]. Then, gather our forces in E-Rantel and initiate the siege on the capital."

"Yes, my lord. I will get on with that immediately ~arinsu."

"Will the main army include people from Nazarick?"

"Send out the Master Guarders of Nazarick and the other elite guards. They are not too strong individually but are quite a sight to behold as a unit."

"Roger."

“Excellent. We will conquer the cities one by one and stage the final battle at the capital as planned. Afterwards, though it might be out of order now, we will finish massacring the inhabitants of all the useless cities. Through this show of force, the world will come to understand the consequences of not bowing to the rule of Nazarick.”

The Floor Guardians all responded with confidence. Ainz nodded deeply.

“Very well then, Floor Guardians—” Ainz thought about the future for a while and opened his mouth again to say, “No, a portion of the guardians should stay behind. Everybody else, demonstrate to me your true power!”

Intermission

In the city that formed a part of the Karnassus City-State Alliance, Bebad.

The city's female mayor's residence was lit up as usual.

The owner of the residence, Ri Kista Kabelia, took the accumulated documents and started reading.

The City State Alliance was comprised of:

Karnassus.

Beppo Allo.

East Gaith.

West Gaith.

Veneria.

Greater Listaran.

Orcneas.

New Orcneas.

Grand Wythes.

Ris.

Franklin.

And finally, Bebad.

This city was part of the twelve mentioned that had formed an alliance. Each city — including the other territories they own — held on average, a population of 400,000. The largest city was home to 600,000.

Amongst these cities, Bebad was an exception in that the other cities never had a single race hold majority over 40% of the population. The City-State Alliance was a union of multiple races and cities. If one were to rewind time back a few centuries, they would find the huge nation that was the origin of the City-State Alliance.

Due to that enormous country's collapse, fourteen city-states popped up with each metropolis at its center. After that happened, there was much bloodshed

between the city-states — or rather, small countries. This situation continued on with the states uniting and splitting ad nauseam until the event they called the Great Debate, at which the current alliance between the twelve city-states were formed.

Even so, it was still difficult for everybody to abandon their predispositions towards each other. Though a century ago was the past for the races with shorter lifespans, to some of the longer-lived races it was still a recent memory.

For this reason, a quinquennial tournament was held as an outlet for those who still held a grudge from the past and it was about to begin soon.

The city on the roster to host the next tourney was Bebad.

While it was true that there were four years' worth of time to prepare for it, they only had four years' worth of time left.

The tournament had sixteen events, one of which garnered more attention than the rest.

The Connelier — or mock combat. It was also known colloquially as the Mutual Wallop.

Every city-state sent ten of its strongest fighters who would then fight the other combatants under the protection of the magic item known as the Standard of Peace.

This was the most entertaining and flashy of the events and was quite popular among the populace. It had come to the point where the majority of the people felt that it was fine to miss out on all of the events except for this one. That was why they could not allow even the slightest of errors to occur during this event.

That was not a metaphor, a riot with massive casualties had been incited in the past when the city-state of Orcneas had not been fully prepared for the event. Even though forty years had passed from then to now, the phrase "The Organizer of Orcneas" remained a derogatory title for an incompetent person.

Though a screw-up on any of the events could incite anger, the Connelier was the single event where not even half a mistake was permitted.

However, the top-level government of each city knew that the Orcneas' organizer was not that incompetent, their problem laid in their lax of alertness against Vanquished Spectres.

There was not any direct evidence to support the existence of Vanquished Spectres. Even if that was the first time they had appeared, the mistake they caused was fatal.

Kista rubbed her eye ridges after she had finished reading the documents.

The last time Bebad had hosted the tournament was about fifty years ago. The members of the core team in charge of organizing the affair had long since passed away.

Though she had steeled herself to learn the ropes from scratch, she still felt as though she could collapse from the stress and pressure of this entire ordeal.

She had lost sleep every time the thought that the tournament could end in failure came to mind.

Kista could not help but titter.

She still had four years to go yet was already in this state. What would she be like when it was close to the opening ceremony?

She was already annoyed by it.

But, as she read through the documents left behind by her predecessors and wrote down all of her thoughts and ideas, there was a brief moment of solace.

Just as Kista was about to grab another handful of documents, someone knocked on her door.

She stood up from her chair and walked towards the door. On the other side of it was the familiar face she was expecting. It was her grandfather, the former mayor of the city, Ri Berun Kabelia.

Not only was he the great-person responsible for Bebad's lasting peace, he was also the mayor when the tournament was last held in Bebad.

"Grandfather-sama," Kista greeted him with a smile, "Did you come here on purpose or were you just around? I would have gone straight to you if you told me to."

"It's fine, it's fine, I'm just exercising for my spine's sake. Even if my legs do not work like they used to, if I were to be cooped up in the house forever, it would atrophy even faster. That aside, Kista, sorry for interrupting your work but are you alright?"

"Mmmm, of course I'm fine, grandfather-sama. Please, come in."

Kista led her grandfather towards the sofa, where they sat opposite of each other.

Berun poured hot tea into the two teacups Kista had prepared for them. The pale green liquid gave off a mild and refreshing aroma that permeated the entire room.

"So, Kista. I heard from one of the maids that you haven't been sleeping well these past few days?"

Though she did not want her grandfather to worry, she could not hide it any

longer.

"Yes, grandfather-sama. It's hard for me to fall asleep every time I'm reminded of what could happen in another four years..."

Most people would laugh at the notion that someone would be worried over what would happen four years down the line, perhaps they would even say that she was being too anxious. Berun however, was not laughing. The weight of the burdens shouldered by a mayor was a feeling he naturally knew all too well from his long years serving as this city's mayor.

"Kista. If you are already in this state, you will ruin yourself. This is an herbal tea that will help calm you down. Drink it and go to sleep early. An exceptional leader is not one who could accomplish the most in the shortest amount of time, but one who understands how to properly delegate their responsibilities to the appropriate subordinates. Never mind you or me, how much can we truly achieve all by ourselves, right?"

"Thank you so much. But... I still have some work that needs to be completed soon."

"Is it something to do with the neighboring cities? But I don't remember hearing about the Equestrian King making any movements?"

The enemy of the City-State Alliance would be the one who occupied the vast plains of the east, the Equestrian King. Since Bebad was nowhere near the plains, whenever the country was under attack, they just had to send their levies.

"...The news of the Empire recently becoming a vassal state, surely you have heard of that already. The issue of exactly how much we should be on our guards against the Sorcerer Kingdom is something that must be resolved as soon as possible."

"Ah, the Sorcerer Kingdom..."

Berun's expression turned apprehensive.

The country that vassalized the Empire yet only had a single city of its own. There were also rumors floating around that they had assimilated that infamous assassin organization into their own ranks.

There were all kinds of rumors and gossip floating around, whether they were true or false was hard to tell.

Kista was reminded of someone.

The Emperor of the Empire, Jircniv Rune Farlord El-Nix.

The young emperor who had been given the title of the Bloody Emperor, she had met him once as part of a diplomatic mission — as a top-level official of the

envoy to the Empire. They had conversed with each other at the reception gala that was held afterwards.

He was one who was rich in intelligence, wealth, and charm as expected of a country's leader. How did someone like him become the vassal of another state?

There had to be a reason why — he must be coveting something.

"In regard to the intelligence-gathering process on the Sorcerer Kingdom, could I trouble grandfather-sama to pull some strings?"

Berun, as a long-reigning mayor of the city, had quite a lot of connections, far beyond what Kista had. Of course, she had met with most of his connections when she had inherited his post, but if Berun was the one to ask for that kind of information instead of her, it would be much more effective.

"Of course, Kista. Although this was not exactly through my connections, I have heard of some brilliant adventurers who had just immigrated from the Empire to here, should I ask them about it?"

"Yes please, sorry to trouble you — grandfather-sama, thank you so much."

Kista deeply lowered her head. Even if they were of kin, he was someone who was nearly eighty years of age yet could still assume the role of mayor with no issues at all. He was even reverently referred to as the "Eagle of Bebad" in the surrounding area. This was something that she had kept in mind since youth.

"Thanking me would be too — never mind, I accept your gratitude, Kista. Starting from today, even just temporarily, go to sleep early. Am I understood?"

"—Yes, grandfather-sama. Thank you for all the care you have provided me thus far."





Chapter 3 The Last King

1

A large number of documents were gathered in this office along with several officials of internal affairs. Their expressions were hard to look at, the reason being their increased workload had taken its toll. Another reason for this would be the stress they felt from their knowledge of the Kingdom's perilous status.

Zanac shook his right hand which had been signing so many documents that it started to ache and moved his shoulders around in circles. He could hear his body creak as he did so.

It seemed that his body, just like the others, desperately yearned for rest.

Though he wanted to take a break right now, the amount of work that was being transferred to this office was unfortunately ever increasing.

Given that was the case, he should either fetch more hands to deal with this or distribute his work to the others. Unfortunately, there wasn't anyone there that Zanac could delegate his work to. If anyone were to take over Zanac's workload, it would have to be another member of the royal family.

Zanac had his own reasons for not requesting help from his father or Renner.

The truth was, he had access to aid but just could not call upon it.

Zanac lifted up his pen again, scanned through the document that was placed

in front of him, and signed and stamped it.

After repeating the same routine for the eighth time, a knock on the door was heard.

Sighs could be heard from multiple officials. Perhaps this was another delivery of even more documents.

One of the officials, whose heavy breathing sounded unnaturally like a sow screeching, stood up and walked towards the door at a snail's pace. His movements were so sluggish that it was as though he believed that the slower he moved, the less he would have to work.

A knight stood outside the door.

"I'm terribly sorry for bothering you in these busy times, but Renner-sama wishes to speak with Your Highness."

It was not what he had expected, but it was still an equally troublesome matter.

"I am busy, so no. Tell her to talk to me during dinner if she has something to say."

Ever since his brother went missing, Zanac and his family had tried to dine together as much as possible. These past few days were the exception, Renner had probably been dining alone for a while.

She could not possibly be feeling lonely though. In these times when there was a shortage of maids, she would have dined with Climb and Brain instead. She was probably happier now than ever, perhaps happier than either Zanac or their father.

"Yes, Your Highness."

The knight shut the doors and left, but Zanac knew that Renner would not accept that excuse at all.

Zanac stopped writing and ordered the official who was about to walk back to his post to stay in place.

After about a minute had passed, the door was knocked on again and the same knight was behind it with the exact same message as before.

"I'm very sorry, Your Highness. The Princess, she said... If you don't want her to spread some rumors which may or may not be true, go meet with her at once."

Is she seriously resorting to threat? Zanac gave a wry smile. Though he did not believe that his sister would actually do as she claimed, if she was willing to threaten him, he should probably listen to what she had to say. If rumors were actually spread around, no doubt his workload would increase even further.

He just had to act as though he was being forced against his will.

"Got it, let her in but no one other than Renner. Those two, just let them wait in the adjacent room."

"Yes, Your Highness."

From the knight's immediate response Zanac could tell that his predictions were correct, those two had tagged along.

Brain was the Kingdom's best warrior, unparalleled in his strength. Climb was also much stronger than a regular warrior. To have those two stay inside the palace all day and be Renner's bodyguards felt like a waste of talent.

Those two were not under the palace's direct employ but were instead paid through Renner's privy purse and thus were her direct subordinates. Zanac had no say about their assignment.

After the knight had closed the doors, Zanac turned to the officials still toiling away in the room and said,

"You all, my sister is due to arrive soon, what will I ever do with her? Rejoice, for a break is upon you all. Three hours starting from now. Rest up and return rejuvenated."

The officials gave their tired smiles and shambled out with heavy steps as if they were zombies.

Princess Renner entered soon after. Unlike the officials who had just left, she had on her a radiant smile.

"Onii-sama, forgive me for speaking out of turn, but those officials of internal affairs could be much more efficient if you let them rest well. People tend to make more mistakes when they are tired. Speaking of which, is Onii-sama alright?"

Zanac rubbed his stubble-covered chin. He had worked an equal amount of time as those officials so he naturally appeared as tired as they were. He did want to take a rest, but as a superior, way too many things depended on him.

"I honestly think we should hire someone who could forge my signature."

"There was a person who could forge father's signature, should I fetch him?"

Renner stared silently at Zanac. He knew what her question meant, but it was better to check to be sure.

"—What do you mean?"

"Is our father still well?"

Zanac had a wry smile.

"Oy oy... you think I would plot to kill our father? In this current situation...?

Father was not feeling too well, he's resting in his room. I doubt he could rest well if he was reminded of his duties as king. Which is why you, as the Princess, should not meet him for now. Sorry~"

Renner's smile matched his. Upon seeing that, he knew she understood it all.

"Onii-sama, between us, there is no need to lie. Onii-sama, without Marquis Raeven's soldiers, has enough manpower to place our father under surveillance. The Ministers of the Interior and Military Affairs must have already joined Onii-sama's side... What does father plan to do?"

"He still wants to talk it out with the Sorcerer Kingdom."

Because of that, Zanac had to step in as the King's regent and take care of everything else the best he could.

Since he had locked his father up, he had to take all of these matters into his own hands. If he still requested help from his father given these circumstances, he would truly be the most pathetic man ever.

"Mmmm... Still, I understand father's line of thought. After all, he had witnessed 200,000 men being instantly wiped out on the battlefield..."

Plus he had lost Gazef Stronoff and his own son. Zanac did not give voice to those thoughts but just grumbled in his heart.

"It is not that I cannot relate to his desire to settle this through diplomacy, to reduce the number of casualties to the lowest possible, but things have already progressed to a stage where a resolution through diplomacy is no longer possible."

Zanac took out a huge sheet of paper and spread it on the table.

It wasn't regular scrap paper, but a lavish piece of thin and white paper. On it was the full map of the Kingdom made through [Copy].

"Look. These are the cities in the Kingdom that had already fallen to the Sorcerer King's conquest."

Numerous "X" marks dotted the northern and eastern sides of the Kingdom, more than half of the cities were marked. Someone well versed in cartography would know from the size of those cities alone, they were home to a large number of people. Those who were intelligent enough should have already realized that if this map had included villages, the number of "X"s would be multitudes higher.

Zanac traced a path on the map with his fingers.

"Though the Sorcerer Kingdom appeared to have not been making any moves since the war had begun, they had actually been invading the north."

Renner looked at the country Zanac's finger stopped at.

"To put pressure on our neighbors like the Council State, to prevent any reinforcement from being sent here, right?"

"That's correct. We had thought that they had not been moving at all and that the declaration of war was just an empty threat. While our naive father was attempting to negotiate with them, things have already developed to this stage. Cities were destroyed and our people were massacred en masse."

Zanac gnashed his teeth and made an audible sound.

"...Such barbarity. Absolutely unforgivable."

Those who could tolerate this kind of treatment were not fit to be called royalty.

"So the Sorcerer Kingdom has no intention of communicating with us. Surely they're planning something unprecedented? Right?"

"You're right, what will happen next — perhaps a more open act of aggression."

Zanac nodded his head.

That was why he had been busy formulating a call to arms to send to every noble within the country.

"Tell me, oh sister of mine, please use that brilliant mind of yours. Why did we not notice the Sorcerer Kingdom's invasion? Why did we not receive any intel of the invasion before the northern city of E-Naüru had repelled the enemy's attack?"

When the Sorcerer Kingdom besieged a city, it was said that not a single soul was spared from the resulting massacre. However, to have made sure that no leaks had occurred was a feat that was pretty much impossible. After all, merchants and travelers still strutted around even during wartimes.

What had they done to seal everybody's mouths?

Was it some sort of spell by the Sorcerer King?

"Onii-sama could smell a whiff of it too right? The Sorcerer Kingdom had placed all of our sources of intel on lockdown."

"Ah... so you think so too. So if that was the case, these "X" marks might not be true either."

"If this wasn't something the Sorcerer Kingdom had done, things would be much easier to explain. We may have a traitor amongst us."

The primary possibility was that some official of internal affairs had betrayed them and were reporting false intel. The other possibility was that some of the

Kingdom's nobles had swung over to the Sorcerer Kingdom's side and were submitting false reports.

Zanac's finger continued to trace lines upon the map. He pondered, which noble could be corrupted to manipulate such a massive amount of intel.

Zanac's finger stopped on a city and he moved it aside to not block it.

"...Oh sister of mine, surely you have figured it out already, which noble had betrayed us?"

"Can't it be that other possibility?"

She could see through him completely. Though in the past he had found his sister's intelligence to be annoying, she felt more reliable now than anything else.

"...I could count on one hand the number of people who would have this much control over the intel that flows into the capital. The Minister of Military Affairs for example, but not even he could control the flow of merchants and travelers in and out of the capital. It is impossible for anyone within the capital to have the ability to lock down our intel like that."

"If you understood this much, surely Onii-sama already has the answer in mind... It's Marquis Raeven."

"—How? Impossible."

Zanac rejected that notion immediately, even though his finger had been resting on E-Libera.

"Do you really believe that to be impossible? Marquis Raeven is one to dote over his son. What if, someone was to kidnap his son and hold him hostage?"

"...Is that how they coerced Marquis Raeven? Absolutely despicable!"

"Though, I'm of the opinion that he may have betrayed us simply because he thought that 'the crown is done for.'"

Although he was unwilling to believe in Marquis Raeven's betrayal, there was no other nobleman who was as powerful as him. He would only need to call in a few favors with other nobles close to him before he could completely cut off the flow of intel to and from the city of his choice. The survivors would have also chosen to seek shelter and protection from the larger cities, E-Libera would have been an excellent choice in that regard.

Was it because of those factors that the Sorcerer Kingdom had set their sights on him?

"...What kind of person do you believe the Sorcerer King to be?"

"Abnormally flexible in his ways of thought, he possesses enough intellect and

guile to scheme at a national-level. What is most terrifying about him is the fact that he does not simply rely on his overwhelming power, but meticulously plans out his every move. One could say that he is a monster to whom the concept of arrogance is completely foreign."

Hoh? Zanac looked at Renner, something felt off about her. Her expression was the same as usual, but her voice carried an unusual emotion, that of awe and reverence.

"The web of plots unfolding in front of our eyes were perhaps weaved into the Kingdom many years ago. We are but stuck moths."

"I would prefer to say butterflies."

"In any case, we are at their mercy, it does not matter if Onii-sama prefers to use butterflies in that metaphor or not. Even if we slipped through these webs unharmed, there would just be another layer underneath... it is frankly terrifying. I did not believe that someone like him could exist in this world. What if our actions were all well within his calculations?"

"So you are saying that he is better than you?"

Renner laughed and did not respond.

"Let's go back to our previous topic, Onii-sama is probably thinking about searching through Marquis Raeven's residence, right? I do not think that you could find anything substantial there."

"That is true, but surely we cannot just remain idle, right?"

Given how likely it was that Marquis Raeven had betrayed them, they had to do something about it. He was still hopeful that they could find even the slightest trace of a clue to all of this.

"Before we do that, I have a question for Onii-sama. If the current situation progresses on, the Sorcerer Kingdom would surely initiate the final battle near the capital. Would Onii-sama order the soldiers to defend the city or send them out to receive the attack? How will we be raising our forces?"

"I have already received satisfactory responses from our neighboring nobles."

Those who were more distant had not replied yet. It was not because they had not received his message yet, but because they wished to watch from the sidelines. They probably wished to see the royalty wiped out so that they could bow to the Sorcerer King as his new subjects. Or perhaps it was because they did not want to get on the Sorcerer Kingdom's bad side by defending the Kingdom.

Either train of thought was naive to say the least.

Their belief that they could distance themselves away from this was proof

enough on its own of their utter stupidity.

No, he should not be mocking their idiocy. If they knew of how ruthless the Sorcerer Kingdom had been, they would not have done so. They were simply all victims to the information lock that was placed on them all.

Once the capital fell, there was no doubt in his mind that the Sorcerer Kingdom would extend its brutality to the other cities. The nobles who wished to abstain from this battle would end up in defeat anyways.

"Do you believe that... we could win?"

Zanac gave a wry smile and responded calmly to this convoluted question.

"It is not a matter of whether we win or lose, we simply have no option but to face them in battle. The Sorcerer Kingdom will scorch every inch of this country and slaughter all of our citizens. This is our last stake at survival."

"...Onii-sama... is already king, eh?"

"What? What do you mean? Are you saying that I am being too full of myself?"

"...Umm, if we were to be defeated in this battle, wouldn't the Kingdom be destroyed? If that is the case then the citizens of the Kingdom would not be safe no matter where they escape to. While I do not believe Onii-sama's choice to stake it all on this battle to be incorrect, Marquis Raeven may have betrayed us for this reason too, to save the citizens."

"I see... so that his city could become a sanctuary for the refugees, hmmm."

"But I doubt the Sorcerer King would allow that to happen. Perhaps he had also ordered Marquis Raeven to kill the people seeking refuge in his city to test his loyalty."

Why would Marquis Raeven betray them? No, has he betrayed them at all? Perhaps this too was another ploy of the Sorcerer King, to sow the seeds of doubt amongst them to bait him and Renner in.

Zanac recalled the Marquis Raeven who only wanted a better future for the Kingdom.

Maybe he should write him a letter and have an honest conversation with him, but that could be a dangerous move.

A traitor who continues to receive their former letters. That would certainly cause the Sorcerer King to cast doubts on him.

That could be a ploy that he could use against them, but it was better saved for a situation in which Marquis Raeven would be marching along with the Sorcerer King's army. This was not the best time to do something like this. If Marquis Raeven really was being coerced by threats against his family's

wellbeing, he could not fault him.

Zanac recalled the Marquis Raeven who excessively doted over his son.

He reminisced so hard his eyes almost squinted into a line until he was knocked back to reality by the sight of his sister.

"Refugees...? Speaking of which, father wanted you to... well, he wanted us to seek refuge in the City-State Alliance as the Kingdom's representatives. That was way before I placed father under surveillance. If you still want to do so, you better get away from the capital soon."

Soon enough he will have to draft everybody he could and face a decisive battle against the Sorcerer Kingdom. If he was being honest, they had no chance at all. Defeat meant that the capital and the other cities would be razed to ashes.

That meant that nowhere within the Kingdom was safe. Perhaps they should follow their father's suggestion and abandon the country.

In normal circumstances, there were two ways a victor would have dealt with a kingdom's former royalty.

One was to mix their lineage through political marriages, the other was to wipe out everyone with royal blood to leave no loose ends behind.

The Sorcerer Kingdom would definitely choose the latter.

"That is an excellent idea, would Onii-sama come too?"

"At this point, how could I... If our elder brother were still here I would have chosen to run too. Do not mind me, what are you going to do? The Sorcerer King is undead so he probably wouldn't take *that* kind of interest in women, so they would undoubtedly be killed too."

"If the Sorcerer Kingdom attacked us, I could be violated by one of our own who's desperate enough to do so."

Zanac showed his disgust on his face upon hearing how calmly his sister had said such words. But, he had to admit that she was also being realistic.

Renner's beauty was renowned, it would not be out of the question for those kinds of people to exist.

"Then remember to not leave Climb and Unglaus's side for now."

"Mmm, okay, I won't let Climb leave my side."

"There's no one but the two of us here and I won't speak of it given the current situation, but you have to answer me with 'those two.'"

Why would Brain Unglaus choose to serve under this woman?

Though he had heard rumors that Brain was interested in Climb, he did not appear to be gay in the slightest. However, after some investigations, it did

appear that he had not had a woman at all — it could not possibly be because he's only interested in children, right?

He did not give voice to those thoughts given how scary his sister is. If those two were to find out about it, it would be troublesome.

"Anyways, I do not intend to flee. As a princess, I will face death with grace and dignity."

That was unexpected.

He had thought about this in the past, about how she would be fine with any kind of life as long as she was with Climb. Perhaps she was only putting up a front and had already prepared to escape.

She would be the type to do that...

"But even a corpse could still be exploited by the Sorcerer King."

"Perhaps, will Onii-sama be leading the army against the Sorcerer King?"

"Ah, yeah. Even though my presence would not make a difference at all, the army needs a royal to lead them — I have to take a stand."

Zanac looked towards the ceiling.

"You have said something to the effect that I am the king-to-be in the past, that is why this responsibility falls on me... father will hopefully take care of my funeral arrangements... you can choose to run away at any time."

Though he found his sister to be annoying most of the time, they still shared the same blood. To do what a brother should was the least he could do. Perhaps he could receive the gods' pity after his death.

"I understand. I'll do so when the time comes."

As Zanac retracted his gaze on her, he saw that Renner had replied with her usual smile.

2

The Sorcerer Kingdom had finally begun their westward invasion. City after city and village after village fell in their wake. They were beelining towards the capital, albeit at a painfully slow rate.

The larger an army was, the slower it would march. However, according to her companion, Evileye, this should not apply to the Sorcerer Kingdom's army, which was completely comprised of the undead. She believed that this was done to stress out the Kingdom's inhabitants.

The stress of an invading army had already caused chaos to break out within the capital and many had died as a result. After that had happened, the people of the capital had two options.

The first was to flee the capital and move towards the opposite direction of E-Rantel — the west.

The other option was to remain in the capital, shut their doors, and never come out of hiding.

As to which option was more popular, the overwhelming majority of people chose the latter. Those who chose the former were all people with the capital, connections, or skills to guarantee their survival even in faraway lands.

That was why more than 95% of the capital's population chose to stay.

But, that was only true till yesterday.

The royalty had put up a decree.

The decree was that due to the ever-encroaching army of the Sorcerer Kingdom, the city required more manpower to defend it. All able-bodied men had to join the battle. It was essentially a draft.

Of course, there were those who feared the battlefield and so still chose to hole themselves up, but the amount of people who believed that if they were to

not contribute to the war effort, their loved ones would die, held the majority.

The fiery passion of the people began to spread within the capital, those affected by it started to descend into madness. The streets bustled with men preparing for war. Fathers and their sons alike were soldiers. Those who wished for better rations while they were away made the culinary industry boom. This was all exacerbated by the people's knowledge that the royalty had ordered every merchant within the city to keep food prices low.

The members of Blue Rose shuffled through the crowd.

Lakyus had a suggestion for her companions behind her.

"I said, guys, I can handle it on my own. The request did not specify who should go, but that does not mean that all of us must move out at once. I bet everybody is busy, right? How about we go our separate ways here?"

"...What is up with you, Lakyus? Is there a reason why you don't want us to tag along?"

Lakyus forcefully adopted a smile upon hearing what Evileye had said. Though in her mind she had thought, "How keen of you!" she did not give voice to that thought. Evileye was fine in that regard, Tina and Tia were much keener than she was. Thank the gods she was not facing them instead.

"I understand what Lakyus is feeling right now. I heard that Azuth-danna was coming too, right?"

Lakyus' felt her heart drop for a moment.

That was correct. Lakyus' uncle, the leader of the adamantite-ranked adventurer group Red Drop, Azuth Aindra was invited alongside them.

"Oh, you're family. There must be a lot you two want to discuss in private, right? We understand."

Nice, their confusion led them away from the real reason. Lakyus concurred with what Gagaran had said,

"That's right. Could you guys just do this for me? He didn't even look for me after he came to the capital. So—"

"How perplexing."

"Unbelievable."

"Eh?"

Lakyus looked towards the twins.

"You two are related and both are leaders of adamantite-ranked adventurer groups. Given the current situation he still did not tell you about his return to the capital, so how did our requestor find out about it?"

“If he was related to Red Drop, he should have said so. But, that requestor said nothing at all.”

Last night, a man of insignificant stature showed up at the inn Blue Rose was staying at, told them that they had a job request, and to head to this location. To have directly approached them rather than go through the Adventurer’s Guild was an act suspicious enough that it made Lakyus want to reject his offer. However, upon learning that Azuth of Red Drop would be there too, she had to show up as well.

“That’s right. This is beyond suspicious. This could be called a conspiracy even. It could be a lie to bait us in or something.”

“Yeah. Given the possibility that this could be a trap — even though you are strong, there are still some things you can’t handle alone. If this other party is trying to harm us, we should try not to get picked off one-by-one.”

“Guys…”

Lakyus was happy that everybody was so worried over her. But—

“Also, we also want to meet with that hero-senpai.”

“I’ve only heard of his name but have never met with him in the past. If you’re related to him, it should be easy for us to meet with him, right?”

Lakyus felt her stomach collapse in on itself.

While her uncle was not exactly a bad person, he could not be called a good person either. Overall, what she was certain of was the fact that he was someone who could only be a bad influence on children.

When Lakyus had met with him back when she was still a child, he appeared to be normal but that might have been him just hiding his true nature. Perhaps his screw came loose during his adventures?

She only had one solution to things that she could not understand — though this was not exactly something the gods would bother with — and that was to pray. Other than that, there was nothing she could do about it.

Her uncle was the type to act all honest and upstanding when meeting someone for the first time. He was also the type to spout corny lines like, “if you long for a hero, then it is that hero’s duty to grant your wish.”

She could only hope that he would do the same this time.

Lakyus and company arrived at the inn they were told to go to.

The business around here seemed to be quite run down and the place was just dirty in general.

The doors to the inn were built well and surprisingly heavy.

Right after Lakyus had pushed open the door, Tia and Tina tapped her twice on her waist.

It was a signal for her to be on alert. They must have noticed something.

Opposite the door was the counter yet they could not see any evidence of tavern-like business was being conducted here.

That meant that this place was remote enough that this establishment could not operate as a tavern, but only as an inn.

Lakyus felt that everybody had switched modes due to the eeriness of this place. They were prepared for combat to break out at any second.

Lakyus spoke to the aloof man behind the counter.

"...We are Blue Rose, here to meet with our client."

"Go to room 301. Mister Azuth of Red Drop is already there."

Was he really here? It was time to find out.

Lakyus thanked him and immediately ascended the stairs to the side.

The inn was incredibly silent. They did not cross paths with another person the whole way there, nor did they hear any sounds at all. Was it because the walls had great sound-isolation properties or was it because the inn was actually empty?

The group reached the third floor and found the number of rooms on the floor to be surprisingly low. The rooms on this floor were probably huge.

Lakyus knocked on the door that had a sign marked with the number 301.

"Uncle, it's Lakyus!"

After focusing her ears, she faintly heard a man's voice on the other side of the door saying, "come in." The volume of the voice was so low that she could not tell if it was her uncle's or not.

After blocking Tia and Tina, Lakyus pushed open the doors herself.

The interior of the room was vastly different from its exterior.

The room was filled with exquisite and heavy furniture, much more luxurious than Lakyus' inn. To be honest, that creeped her out. This inn was terribly suspicious after all.

They had not even finished surveying the entire room when a voice was directed towards Lakyus.

"Aw, Lakyu-chan! Long time no see!"

"Unc..."

That was indeed her uncle's voice.

Lakyus forcefully slammed the doors shut towards the direction her uncle's

voice had come from.

"W-what's going on, Lakyus?"

Gagaran was the first to speak.

Everybody must have heard her uncle's voice already. It was hard for her to say that nothing was wrong after that display.

"Guys, I feel like I should meet with my uncle alone after all."

"This girl... Are you seriously saying such things even after we came all the way here?"

Evileye's dumbfounded voice was to be expected.

Lakyus looked at everybody's expressions. Evileye had spoken as their representative, she could tell that the rest of them had the same thought from their expressions alone.

Then—

"Sigh, guys. Let me make it clear. My uncle is an odd individual."

"...The leader of Red Drop?"

Lakyus put on the stern expression as expected of a leader and nodded upon hearing what Tina had said, she then looked towards the others. They were confused, but having known Lakyus for a long time, they knew her to be honest. After she had parsed that from their expressions, Lakyus opened the door again.

There was a shiny velvet chaise longue in the room.

On it sat a man, a man she knew well — it was Azuth Aindra in the flesh.

His upper torso was completely exposed, one could clearly make out his well-defined abs and puffed-up pecs. This was not exactly how one should present themselves in front of their client yet it was not the reason why Lakyus stopped her companions from advancing forward.

On top of Azuth's body, to his left and right, were two half-naked women snuggling up to him.

No, they could not be called half-naked. Their voluptuous chests were fully exposed and though they were wearing undergarments, they were just strings that barely covered up anything at all.

From their appearances, they appeared to be high-class escorts.

Erotic outfits that were likely taken off recently were strewn across the ground. Azuth held both women in each of his arms, his hands were latched on their breasts, rubbing them.

"Uncle... your niece was summoned here by the same client. Can't you welcome me in a more appropriate manner?" Lakyus said.

However, Azuth's hands did not leave the breasts of those women as he continued to knead them without giving it much thought. The women did not seem to mind Lakyus' group at all but just uncaringly continued on with their soft moans.

This attitude honestly enraged Lakyus a little. If these women had been procured by their client, Lakyus would like to have a word with them.

"Naaah, I thought that you guys would come a bit later. Uhh, I'm not actually doing it on the bed anyway, so why should it matter?"

"Of course it should!" Lakyus did not bother to turn around to check her companions' expressions.

"...Really?" Azuth's had a confused expression, yet he did not stop rubbing the women. "You're just too inflexible in your ways of thought! It is in every man's nature to want to fuck beautiful women. My children would probably be born with the same gift too. Don't you know that it's important to ensure that our bloodline continues on?

"Hmmm, even though you're high-born, this kind of mentality is still so deeply ingrained in your heart?"

Upon hearing what Evileye had said, Azuth put on a displeased expression and stared at her. Though they could feel a sense of pressure from his gaze alone, none of Blue Rose backed down. To Evileye especially, it felt just like a soft breeze. She continued,

"...Sigh. From your expression alone I can tell that was a bullseye. They call you a hero but you're no different than a child. Actually, could it be that the reason why you abandoned your status as a noble and chose the life of an adventurer was precisely because you are this kind of person...? Anyways, this is no attitude to receive your clients. Ladies, begone."

"—What's with this child?"

The woman lying on the right glared at Evileye.

"Sigh, what a bother. Hey, Aindra... Is the room on that side still vacant?"

Evileye pointed towards a door that was not the one to the corridor.

"Ahhh. That's a bedroom, I've checked it already."

"Is that so? Then send them there."

"What's with this child? What is she trying to do?" The woman to the left glared at Evileye with an angry expression. "Don't you act all high and mighty now, you're just a brat who won't even dare to show their face."

"...Sigh. [Charm Person]. Go."

"Ah, yes. Understood."

The woman on the left stood up immediately, prompting the woman on the right to take on a shocked expression with her mouth wide-open—

"You too. Don't forget the clothes on the floor."

Before the woman could respond, her [Charm Person] had already been cast. The women obediently walked into the adjacent room.

Azuth pouted and raised his shoulders. From an adventurer's perspective, what Evileye had done was no different than someone drawing their blade, yet he did not appear to fault her for it. Though she did not want to admit it, Evileye saw him as pretty lenient in that regard.

"Evileye... good job!" Tina raised a thumb to Evileye, "To be brave enough to let women who could have been assassins get this close to you, as expected of an adamantite-ranked adventurer."

"Were they?"

"We were trained to do those things back then as well. Women who were not gifted in raw power or arcane talents could only resort to weaponizing their femininity. Though Gagaran cannot relate at all, I'll still explain their methods. First—"

Evileye tuned out of Tia's explanation and spoke to Lakyus instead.

"It would be troublesome if that wasn't done. Well, I won't interrupt you with this topic anymore. Speak of whatever you want I guess."

"Thank you, Evileye. Now then... haaaah..." she was already exhausted before she had spoken a single word, "Now then, uncle, our client this time around is extremely suspicious. Who are they?"

"Hmm? Oy oy, you came here without knowing about them? Hmm, they're someone with a massive organization behind them, probably."

"Probably? Speaking of which, are they someone you are familiar with?"

"I haven't met them in person. If they knew their manners, they would have given me their name. Hmmm, if they intend to hide their identity, then—" Azuth smiled, "—they must be someone shady. So, what are you planning to do?"

"What do you mean what do I plan to do?"

"If you guys want to fle— leave this place, you can use the path I planned out."

"We do not intend to leave."

Lakyus felt everybody's gaze on her.

"...Pffft. Think over it. The Sorcerer King's army has killed every civilian along its way towards here and razed the cities too. To think that the capital would be

any different, aren't you being a little too naive?"

"Then, uncle, let us fight side by side!"

"It's impossible. Because I did not confirm his power directly, I could not say for sure. But if the rumors are all real, I— we can't win against that guy. Only a monster could fight that monster, it would be unwise for humans to intervene."

Azuth sighed tiredly. Lakyus had never seen her uncle like this.

"...I knew this was a waste of time, that was why I did not bring the rest of the team along. I also told my brother to run away."

"But... none of them did, right?"

"Haaah. What a bunch of... idiots. But, he did put his child under my care. They were taken by my companions to the Council State and are probably there already."

Just as complicated emotions arose in Lakyus' heart, Tia nervously said, "—Boss!" At the same time, a man's voice came from the corridor, "You're all on-time!"

The three who had been standing by the door, Tia, Tina, and Gagaran, appeared to be pushed along by an unseen power into the room. A man and a woman followed after them.

The one who walked in front was a young man.

All ten of his fingers had rings adorning them. A gentle smile shone from his face.

Behind him was a tired woman. Her clothes were loose and she walked in a way that said she did not want to walk at all. An unusually giant hat sat on her dome, covering most of her face.

Lakyus raised her guard.

Her companions were being suppressed on a biological level — that is to say, from raw power alone. Both of the visitors were capable of giving the world-famous adamantite-ranked adventurer Lakyus a fright she could not put into words.

Yet, once the person behind them showed up, the atmosphere changed more so than ever.

That man's giant body slowly inched its way into the room. His appearance was that of an axe-wielding barbarian. An intense, overwhelming pressure emanated from him that made them feel as though the space around them was being distorted.

The two in front of them were indeed strong.

But, that man is far more powerful than them both.

Lakyus could not move, as if she was being suffocated.

As an adamantite-ranked adventurer, she had defeated numerous powerful monsters and demi-humans yet they all paled in comparison to this man. He might even be stronger than the skull-wearing demon that appeared during Jaldabaoth's disturbance.

That man was probably the bodyguard of those two.

People as strong as them, if they did not belong to any organization, would inevitably cause rumors about them to spread. If that was the case, what was behind them must be an enormous, national-level organization to be capable of hiding information about them completely.

"...We were right to bring our equipment along."

"...Every single one of them is stronger than us."

"Haaah. I don't remember hearing about people like them within the Kingdom."

"Oy oy oy, you're late already so don't go around spreading that dangerous aura. Did management mandate that you do? Do something this boring?"

The woman Azuth was mocking objected,

"To bring whores along, how impressive, old man. This is not a love hotel though~"

Azuth responded in kind to her,

"Hmph, this place was the exact reason why I called them over, I wanted you all to be as disgusted as I was."

"Tsk—" The woman snapped her mouth shut as she adopted an expression that was hard to look at.

She did not object to what Azuth had said, meaning that this inn was indeed connected to them. There were only two countries that had the capability to set up national-level organizations. One was the Council State, the other was the Theocracy.

The latter was far more likely.

"Well well, if you all will just end this right now, I would be very happy."

"Quie-chan[15]... sigh, Quie-chan is the lead this time so I'll just listen to you."

After being scolded by the gentleman, the woman forced herself to shrug and

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15. Refers to Quiesce, Clementine's brother. He is a beast tamer known as "One Man Army" who serves the Slaine Theocracy as the 5th Seat of the Black Scripture.

nod along.

"Azuth-sama is absolutely correct. You took time out of your busy schedule to meet with us yet we were the last to arrive. I do apologize to your esteemed person."

"Hmph."

Azuth sneered a little, yet that gentleman's smile never faltered.

"Now then, do forgive me for my frankness — let us get down to business, Azuth Aindra-sama and the members of Blue Rose present."

Lakyus squinted her eyes.

Her uncle had abandoned his title as a noble, but because he still retained the title of honorary knight, proper etiquette dictated that he must be referred to by his full name. However, Azuth was the type to dislike being called by his full name.

Those who were meeting him for the first time and wanted to follow protocol would have fallen into this trap.

This gentleman however, managed to avoid this. This meant that this man had done his thorough research, no, it was probably more accurate to say that the people behind this man had done their research.

"Lakyus Alvein Dale Aindra-sama. Evileye-sama. Tia-sama. Tina-sama. Gagaran-sama. We are here to persuade you to join our side. Though fighting to your last breath here is an honorable option, we do implore everyone here to consider the future instead."

"Ugh. Such an impolite fellow. So, which country sent you?"

"It doesn't matter which country we're from. It's all usele—"

Suddenly, a hand appeared from behind the woman and covered her mouth.

"No way!"

Tia and Tina drew their weapons in surprise.

Behind the woman stood a man wearing an odd outfit. His entire body, including his face and hands, were covered. Metal plates lined his clothing for better defense.

"Not good, it's an assassin way beyond our league."

"Not good, he's much stronger than us."

These two were the strongest — most vicious — assassins that Lakyus knew of, but this man was stronger than them both.

"Please do not worry and please sheath your weapons. If our goal was your demise, we would not have introduced ourselves in such a trifling method."

The gentleman was correct. To have entered this room in a way where none of these adamantite-ranked adventurers could notice must have included the use of an ability that was capable of completely masking oneself. To have revealed himself in such an idiotic manner meant that he was not there to assassinate them.

Or perhaps this was part of their tactic too. They were reminding them that if they did not join their side, outstanding assassins could get them at any time.

"Also, as for my companion's slightly inappropriate matter of speech, I do deeply apologi—"

"—Oy oy. What good does hiding that fact do for you? You guys are from the Theocracy, right?"

"Are they really from the Theocracy...? I can't believe that people like this exist there."

A shocked Evileye said. Lakyus was equally surprised.

They had fought against a unit that was burning down demi-human villages in the past and they were strong. Especially the captain of that unit, who was stronger than Lakyus was at that time. Yet, no one from that unit was as strong as the people in front of them.

"You didn't know? I thought that you'd at least have heard rumors about them... they are the pride of the Theocracy, their unit of heroes, the Black Scripture. It's likely that all of them have reached the realm of heroes."

Azuth was looking towards the barbarian.

That man put on the smile a beast would have right before it feasted on its prey.

"Hahahaha... Looks like you know quite a bit about us. But, don't you have one too? Someone like me, or even stronger than me?" He pointed towards Evileye, "Evileye of Blue Rose. You're a hard one to deal with."

Yet his attitude was not of one admitting defeat, rather, his expression told them that he treated Evileye as an equal.

"...Hmph. There are people stronger than me... Hmm... excluding fiends, of all of the humans and demi-humans, only Momon-sama is stronger."

"Only Momon? Hmmm..."

The barbarian muttered to himself while a faint smile bloomed on his face... and said no more.

"I say. People of the Theocracy's secret unit. Why won't you fight alongside us against the Sorcerer King?"

“Perhaps that woman also… no, that was…” Evileye continued to mumble to herself, but Azuth ignored her and asked the gentleman, who responded with his unwavering smile.

“To have received an invitation from your esteemed person is an utmost honor to us all. However, we are here on an express mission to convince your esteemed persons to join us. That is why we can only choose to ceremoniously reject your suggestion. After all, soldiers who participate in battles out of their own selfish desires would only bring harm to their organization.”

“Trying to use your orders as a scapegoat, I see. Still, I’m interested to hear your personal opinion.”

“What a bore — Aren’t things much simpler if we just followed our superiors’ order?”

The annoyed woman said. The gentleman’s smile faded away as it was replaced by a troubled expression.

“I bet you’re the type to find even your own thought process to be annoying.”

“That’s about right. As long as I carry out my orders, the responsibility for them will always fall on my superiors. It’s too annoying to have to shoulder responsibilities myself, so I don’t bother with it. I’m pretty good at shifting responsibilities onto others, I’ve even received praise for it~”

“They weren’t praising you.”

The barbarian whispered to himself.

“Hehe. Now then, Aindra-sama… my apologies. Azuth-sama, we understand what you meant. So, what about the members of Blue Rose?”

“Before that, could we ask a question? How can we escape from here?”

“I will tell you how after you join us. By the way, we have already extended this offer to numerous other adventurer groups and they have all accepted. Those groups have been relocated to safer locations to sit this one out.”

“…Oy. Did you use violence or threats to force them to go with you?”

As Gagaran had said, if someone as strong as them were to threaten other people, it would be hard for them to refuse.

“We really do, from the depths of our heart, want to become comrades with you all. This is a cooperation for our future — for humanity’s future.”

The gentleman did not appear to be lying at all, his personality was probably the reason why he was chosen to be the negotiator.

“…I refuse.”

Lakyus did not even have time to ask for everybody else’s opinions before

Gagaran replied.

"No need for 'I'... we will go with the leader's decision."

Her companions started nodding their heads in agreement upon hearing what Gagaran had said.

"Is that true...? Looks like nothing I could say will sway your opinion. Looks like I'm out of options."

The gentleman took their rejection unusually well. Lakyus lowered her posture in case he resorted to force.

After seeing what Lakyus had done, the gentleman gave a wry smile.

"Please, there's no need to worry, Lakyus-sama. We do not plan to use force. We hope that everyone here could avenge those who have fallen to the Sorcerer King. We have left a fee for your troubles at the reception, please do accept it before you return. Now then — we'll be on our way."

After the gentleman gave his orders, the people of the Theocracy began walking towards the exit. Things appeared to have concluded peacefully. Just as Lakyus breathed a sigh of relief, Azuth called out to the gentleman,

"Oy, speaking of which... The mister named Rufus or Roof-Ass, is he still okay?"

"Ru...? I'm terribly sorry. Our country spans a vast area, so I do not know who you are referring to... If you could be a bit more specif—"

"—Ah, is that so. I suppose it's only natural for people of your rank to not know him by name after all. So, how do you guys usually address that undead? Milord or something?"

Every member of the Black Scripture was stunned and were subsequently filled with malice. The entire room was suddenly overflowing with an aura of bloodlust that made them feel as though combat was about to break out at any moment. The gentleman was the first to make a move.

He extended both arms to stop the people behind him.

"Quie-chan. What is wrong? Are we not killing them?"

The gentleman stared at Azuth with cold, unmoving eyes and calmly replied to the woman,

"He's bluffing. Do not move of your own accord. This is an order." The bloodlust that emanated from them disappeared as fast as it had appeared. The gentleman's cold-eyed stare remained on Azuth, "...Though I am extremely curious to find out the extent of your knowledge on this matter... I will report this to my superiors. Everybody, it's time for us to leave."

The members of the Black Scripture did not lower their guards as they walked out the room but maintained the attitude that if Lakyus' group was to take any sort of action, they would retaliate in kind.

After a while, after Lakyus was certain that the Black Scripture had left already, she started ranting at Azuth.

"Uncle... you're the weakest of us all. Please stop provoking other people."

"Hah...? Indeed, that was pretty dangerous. I did not expect them to antagonize us that much. If it weren't for that man with the fake smile, I would have been dead. They were probably thinking something along the lines of, 'rather than dirty our own hands, it'll be more beneficial if we let the Sorcerer King have his fill first before we have ours' or something. Though I doubt we were worth that kind of consideration."

Lakyus intentionally directed her sigh towards Azuth, who had been laughing loudly.

Was that really the case?

Her uncle had revealed to the Black Scripture that he had some sort of crucial intel on the Theocracy, it would not have been unusual for them to kill him to prevent that intel from getting into the Sorcerer King's hands. The other probable outcome would have been for them to kidnap him to interrogate him or use magic to get the intel out of him.

The root of the issue was why her uncle had let the Theocracy know that he had that kind of intel. If he had not done so, the conversation would have concluded with nothing else happening.

Why would he intentionally burn himself?

Azuth was not someone who couldn't see the bigger picture. Given that was the case, there had to be something in the background that Lakyus did not know of.

She would not get an answer from thinking about it alone. Lakyus stopped that useless train of thought.

"For the gods' sake... So, what does uncle plan to do next?"

"Hah? I plan to wait till the Sorcerer King's army made its way here. The big boys up there seem to be planning to send soldiers to the neighboring territories to take formations. To be honest, I don't think they have a chance at victory. The Sorcerer King and his lackeys will come here sooner or later... You're not strong enough to trade blows with him, just run away."

He had made his intentions clear.

“Even so, I will not abandon this city to run away. Uncle…”

If something were to defeat the Sorcerer King, it would not be the strike of a warrior but rather, the stab of an assassin. Precisely because of that, Lakyus had to clench her teeth and simply watch as waves of men were sent out to defend against the Sorcerer King’s attack.

“If you wish to invite me to fight alongside you, I refuse. I have my own plans.”

“Really?”

“Yup. I will do what I do best, and you should do what you do best. However, for the sake of my cute niece I will reiterate again. It’s best for you all to run away. You are all nothing in the face of the Sorcerer King’s power.”

“…Hmph, what does that mean? Are you saying that you could achieve more than us?”

Faced with Evileye’s question, Azuth laughed as if he did not have an answer to that.

“Indeed, even I could not win against the Sorcerer King. I am but human. But, even if the Sorcerer King surrounds the entire capital, I alone could still escape.”

Azuth stood up.

“Now then, I’ll be going to the other room to work these hips, what will you guys be doing?”

Lakyus realized what her uncle had meant and furrowed her brows.

“We’ll go back. After all, there are still things we need to prepare for.”

Lakyus bid farewell to her uncle and descended the stairs carefully with the rest of her group. They took their pay on the first floor and left the inn. It did not appear as though the Black Scripture was waiting in ambush there.

3

At a distance away from the capital that would take the average traveler three days to cross, the Sorcerer Kingdom's army could already be sighted. This report landed in Zanac's hands. To receive the Sorcerer Kingdom's army's attack, the entire army of the Kingdom had mobilized under Zanac's command.

On the plains about half a day's worth of marching away from the capital, the Kingdom's army had already established a front upon receiving news that the Sorcerer Kingdom was invading from the west. According to their battle plans, they were to wait for the Sorcerer Kingdom's army there.

The front was built upon a wide bit of road that was locked down for this purpose. If the Sorcerer Kingdom's army were to continue on their current, straight trajectory, this would be the most effective. However, if the Sorcerer Kingdom were to change their direction of approach, there would be a need to form a new front. Though they were worried about that possibility, the reports all indicated that the Sorcerer Kingdom was beelining for them. It appeared as though they did not have to worry about that possibility coming true.

Yet no one was rejoicing because of it.

The Kingdom's army that will be facing against the Sorcerer Kingdom's army this time around was comprised of levies from the neighboring nobles, the capital's militia, and able-bodied men drafted from the refugees. It would not be incorrect to call this army the Kingdom's last hope.

In total, there were over 400,000 men.

To have formed such a large army was something worthy of praise, yet the reality was that they were scraping at the bottom of the barrel. Not many had suitable equipment, a lot of people only had a club.

Even under this situation, morale was high. However, the reason for that was

purely because they had the spirit of a cornered beast. They knew the extent of the cruelty the Sorcerer Kingdom had displayed and thus took up arms through the sheer force of will to protect that which they hold dear. If their courage was to take a hit in any shape or form, the Kingdom's army would surely instantaneously collapse.

The size of the army was a weapon in and of itself, the long lines of soldiers alone gave off an overwhelming pressure without them doing anything at all. So then, for what purpose was the Sorcerer Kingdom's army advancing straight towards this army of 400,000?

Even those who were not too well versed in battle tactics would know that facing such a large army head-on was not the best strategy. For the Sorcerer Kingdom, their best strategy would have been to "do nothing." They had an army full of the undead, which did not require supplies at all. In comparison, the Kingdom's 400,000 strong force was akin to a gigantic yet starving beast. As long as they manage to completely surround them and apply pressure inwards, this giant beast would soon doom itself by starving to its death.

Yet the Sorcerer Kingdom's army marched in a straight line, destroying everything in their path. He knew of the Sorcerer King's firm grasp of the bigger picture, so it was hard to imagine that they had done so with no purpose in mind at all.

The Sorcerer Kingdom simply had confidence in their imminent victory.

To something like the Sorcerer Kingdom, this was not reckless behavior at all. To those who could defeat an army of 200,000 men with a single spell, this army of theirs could be wiped out with the use of only two spells.

Of course, Zanac, as the general, did not want to believe that that could happen. However, the people, especially nobles, who believed in that notion were not exactly a minority either.

He understood why they had suggested that their forces should be split into groups. Though they could fall one-by-one, they also avoided the possibility of their entire army succumbing to a single spell.

But they could not do that.

Due to the devastating loss they had experienced during the battle of the Katze plains as well as the current invasion by the Sorcerer Kingdom, not many noblemen who had the skills to command such a large number of soldiers and cavalry were left. Splitting their forces would not create smaller armies, this force of 400,000 soldiers would suddenly turn into 400,000 commoners

instead.

It was precisely because they had this many men gathered — this many comrades — in one place that people had the courage to face the Sorcerer Kingdom.

They had been manning this front for two days now.

A lot of time had been eaten up by the preparation this many men required.

After both sides had set up their formations, the Sorcerer Kingdom's army had adopted a prideful attitude that said loud and clear, "we gave you just enough time to prepare."

Their forces numbered around 10,000, comprising 3-4 types of undead. This was a miniscule number in the face of 400,000 men. However, in terms of individual strength, the Sorcerer Kingdom's army undoubtedly held an overwhelming advantage against them.

"Your Highness."

"I know."

Zanac gave a prompt reply to the Minister of Military Affairs.

The minister's movements were stiff, almost comical at times, due to his unfamiliarity with the armor he wore. But, Zanac was not a pot to call the kettle black.

He was wearing what used to be Gazef's armor, one of the treasures of the Kingdom. Zanac knew that it did not suit him at all, he was far from Gazef's league.

But, Zanac was thankful for this magically enchanted armor.

These past few days, Zanac had been packing on the pounds due his stress-eating habits. If it weren't for the armor's enchanted nature, he would have had to request a blacksmith to add an inch to the waist area.

"Bring forth my horse!"

A steed was brought forth to Zanac's large tent by a knight following his order.

It took Zanac quite a bit of effort to get on his favorite horse, which did not look too kindly to Zanac. He did not take any bodyguards along with him as he rode out of the front and towards the Sorcerer Kingdom's army.

Even if he brought bodyguards along, if the Sorcerer King wanted to kill him, bodyguards would be completely useless. They could not serve as deterrents at all.

That was why riding solo was effectively a demonstration to the onlookers of his courage. If he were to be killed while riding solo, it would serve to damage

the Sorcerer King's public image.

The Hero of Re-Estize... has a nice ring to it.

Zanac reached the midpoint between the two armies with no obstacles at all. He activated a magic item to amplify his voice.

"I am the Prince of the Kingdom of Re-Estize, Zanac Valleon Igana Ryle Vaiself! I wish to seek an audience with His Majesty the Sorcerer King!"

Zanac did not plan to fight a battle of wits against the Sorcerer King. Things had already come to a point where that was completely meaningless.

He just wanted to find out what kind of a thought process would have led the Sorcerer King to do what he had done.

•

Ainz surveyed the front his army had formed from a three-sided tarpaulin tent. Due to the fact that the Sorcerer Kingdom's army was comprised of undead beings that did not require food resupplies, the front they had formed was much smaller than what a conventional army would have.

From an objective perspective, there was no need to establish a front at all and some had even suggested this to him. However, Ainz believed that front building was a valuable experience to gain too.

Actually, from the several fronts they had formed already, the one in front of him looked to be a lot sturdier than what they had at the start.

At first, these fronts were formed with the aid of Mare's magic, but due to a specific reason, Mare had been relegated to simply watching the soldiers build the front at Ainz's side.

Aura was also watching the soldiers on the side, but it appeared that she was only observing her own servants.

No matter if it was front building or tents, magic could always produce an outcome of higher quality. However, due to the same reason as above, Ainz had ordered this tent that was currently being used as their mobile headquarters to be transported to this location through physical means.

It might be a good idea to leave all future civil engineering tasks to Mare.

Amongst the populace of the Sorcerer Kingdom, there were many races of demi-humans and heteromorphs that were adept at digging tunnels. It would be a good idea to make them subordinate to Mare. That said, Albedo or someone

else might have also had this idea and put it into action already. If someone had done so already, then the relevant documentation for this should have already been perused by Ainz. There was a need for him to ask Albedo about this in a roundabout way later.

Was she being tacit? Albedo, who should have been working hard to establish the front, had returned with Cocytus.

"Ainz-sama. It appears as though the humans have sent an envoy. How shall we proceed?"

"Not a messenger to declare the start of the battle? Prepare a reception... Prepare the receptive drinks as well."

As Albedo began to prepare the table, chairs, and such, a man wearing full-plate armor on horseback entered Ainz's line of sight.

Ainz recognized the armor worn by that man.

That's... I think that's Gazef Stronoff's armor. Is this man the Vice-Warrior-Captain? He's quite different from the descriptions I've heard.

The envoy stopped between the two armies and started yelling his introduction.

"I am the Prince of the Kingdom of Re-Estize, Zanac Valleon Igana Ryle Vaiself! I wish to seek an audience with His Majesty the Sorcerer King!"

He could hear him clearly even from this distance. He must have used some kind of magic item.

"What should we do, Ainz-sama? If he is not here to declare the start of the battle then it would be a waste of time to converse with him. Shall we initiate the battle as is?"

"No, Albedo, We. Cannot. Do. That. The. Opponent. Desires. To. Have. A. Battle. Of. Wits. With. Ainz-sama, If. We. Rejected. Him. Outright. It. Would. Reflect. Negatively. On. The. People's. Impression. Of. Ainz-sama's. Magnanimity."

"What value do rumors hold?" Albedo sneered, "They are dead men walking, what good are rumors that fall on no ears?"

Ainz was not too keen on fighting a battle of wits or whatever, surely the royalty of this country would not lose out to him in anything other than combat prowess. Still—

"Albedo. Have you forgotten? About the possibility that the rumor could be transmitted through magic?"

"...I'm terribly sorry."

“Hmm... I will go then. The royalty of our opposition came alone. If I were not to do the same, it would not reflect well on us.”

“Are you sure it will be alright? Ainz-sama.”

“I have no idea. Aura, if I were to be brainwashed or mind-controlled, you should use your World Class Item to protect me.”

Ainz’s usual World Class Item was in Nazarick’s storage, so if Aura used Depiction of Nature and Society on him, he would be trapped in it. This way, even if he was brainwashed, they could not kidnap him through teleportation or other similar methods.

“Understood!”

“Umu,” Ainz replied to Aura and left the front on a Soul Eater. It was worth noting that after Ainz had practiced horse riding, he looked adequate while doing it. However, because he was not too apt at it, to prevent making a blunder in front of the two armies, Ainz still chose to ride a Soul Eater to be on the safe side.

The other party was waiting for Ainz next to his horse, so Ainz also got off the Soul Eater upon arriving at his destination. No matter how bad this was going to get for him, Ainz steeled himself to do to others what they had done to him.

His opponent was a man on the chubbier side of the spectrum. Makeup caked his face to cover up the dark circles under his eyes.

“Nice to meet you, Your Majesty the Sorcerer King. My name is Zanac Valleon Igana Ryle Vaiself.”

“Nice to meet you, I am the Sorcerer King Ainz Ooal Gown. I will be in your care then. Now, a standing conversation would be neither here nor there.” Ainz cast a spell twice, producing two black thrones that faced each other. Because it was created with magic, the two thrones were naturally identical.

“Though it is hard and metallic, we should still sit down first. How do you feel about that?”

“I would be glad to, Your Majesty.”

As they both sat down on the thrones, Ainz cast another spell to create a reflective black table between them.

While Ainz had started casting magic the moment they had met, Zanac did not seem to be on guard at all. It appeared as though he did not have any intention to assassinate Ainz.

Afterwards, Ainz took out two cups and an ice-filled container from his inventory.

“How about some water? Alcohol would be inappropriate given our current situation so, what about orange juice instead…?”

“Thank you very much, Your Majesty. Just water would be fine.”

“Now then, we are all set for the talk. What should we discuss then? Perhaps about the justification of our invasion?”

“That would not be necessary, Your Majesty. I am more interested in the reason why you were insistent on carrying out such heinous acts? Why did you refuse our offer to surrender?”

That was a natural question for him to ask. Although to Ainz, his reasons were clear and justified, to them it must have appeared to be senseless slaughter.

“Umu,” Ainz nodded his head. Given how things had turned out, there was no point in hiding his intentions anymore. He began to exposit the Sorcerer Kingdom’s plans to Zanac.

“Because we stood to gain nothing from that. I intend to sacrifice your people as an example to the world of what will happen to them should they stand against the Sorcerer Kingdom. To that end, you will all be eradicated and the Kingdom will be rendered into a mountain of ash. That mountain will continue to serve as a warning after centuries, after millennia, of how foolish of an act it would be to go against the Sorcerer Kingdom.”

“…You do not appear to be jesting.”

“Of course not, I am just stating what is to come.”

“Why?”

“What do you mean?”

Ainz could not read between Zanac’s lines and thus replied with a question.

“Your Majesty the Sorcerer King is in possession of immense amounts of power. Even if you did not do what you said you would, the people of the world would still come to know your awesome power.” Zanac wetted his lips, swallowed a mouthful of saliva, and asked, “Why are you this petty?”

“Petty, am I?”

Zanac tensed up at the possibility that he had angered Ainz, but Ainz was not angry at all.

“What is your goal?”

Ainz grumbled to himself, “What is *your* goal?”

In the past, to Ainz— no, to Satoru, to have met the buddies he had in the game of *Yggdrasil* was the epitome of his entire life. It was such a wonderful memory that all he wished for was to be reunited with his friends again.

When the plug was about to be pulled from the game, when all of this was meant to be for naught, he was transported to this world instead.

The end turned out not to be the end at all,

But instead, it was a new beginning.

The NPCs created by his friends began to exhibit free will. From their every move he could feel the remnants of his former companions. No, to be honest, the shock he had experienced at the beginning confused him so much that he was constantly worried about their betrayal. Looking back, that was moronic of him. Nowadays, he just did not question their loyalty at all.

Yet, it did not seem like Ainz was the only one who was transported to this world. He could see the footprints left behind by other Players.

Perhaps it was only natural then for him to think that his companions, the people who shared those good times with him, could have come to this world as well. It was only natural for him to wish for this. Of course, Ainz knew that he was transported here during the final moments of the game's operation, which made his friends' appearance in this world unlikely.

Actually, through the use of multiple spells and intel sources, he could faintly sense the lack of their presence. However, since he did not have concrete proof of that belief, the possibility of it happening still remained.

One might call him an idiot for holding on to such vain hopes, one might also call him a futile loser too.

But to the Ainz of yesteryear, that was all his life had amounted to.

And now that dream was gradually fading away.

Sure, his friends were important to him, but now, the NPCs were important to him too.

They were essentially children that had been left behind by his companions.

Ainz, as the only one to have stayed behind, had the duty to protect them at all costs.

Because of this, Ainz was willing to sacrifice his all to ensure no harm ever came to the NPCs. In order to ensure that Nazarick would never fall to outside forces, he had to prioritize the empowerment of the organization's every aspect.

Shalltear was dominated by some unknown entity in the past. Though he had succeeded in regaining control over her, if things had turned out any worse back then, important intel on Nazarick could have been made known to outsiders; consequently, it could have led to the destruction of the guild.

He could not allow something like that to ever happen again.

"What is my goal, you ask? I seek something that is difficult yet also easy to obtain. All I wish for... is a single thing. That is, happiness."

"Happiness?"

Zanac repeatedly blinked in surprise.

Ainz laughed a little in response. He did not find what he had said to be so outrageous.

"No matter if you're human, demi-human, or heteromorph, the pursuit of happiness is the ultimate goal, is it not?"

Ainz threw away his act and began to converse with Zanac as if he were a close friend of his.

"And you would step over others' happiness to achieve your own?"

"Isn't that obvious? If the happiness of those I hold dear could be guaranteed, those of others do not matter to me at all. If you could secure the happiness of your subjects by inflicting suffering on the citizenry of another country, what would you do? Would you say, abandon their happiness altogether?"

"Those are the extremes!" Zanac calmed down as the sentence trailed, he lowered his head and said, "That was out of line of me. My apologies, Your Majesty."

Ainz went back to his ruler persona.

"It is fine, there is no need to worry at all."

"Even with the intellect and power of Your Majesty the Sorcerer King, there are no other possible methods to guarantee happiness?"

"...Perhaps, but, I can only say 'perhaps.' If you had a guaranteed method to obtain happiness, what would be the better option? To seek a possibly non-existent secondary method or sticking with what has been tried-and-true? 'The Goddess of Luck is bald on the back of her head'[16] after all, wasn't that how the saying went?"

Zanac was absolutely incredulous.

"What a strange goddess. Sorry, I did not mean to belittle the goddess you believe in. Please do forgive me."

"Haha, I don't mind at all. That was not the description of some deity I revere, just a proverb I remembered. Very well then, that is the extent of it all. For the happiness of my subjects, I must sacrifice your people. This is the basis for this

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16. Ainz botches a Roman proverb. "Fail not when opportunity is fair; Behind Time's bald, his forehead's thick with hair." From *Disticha Catonis,* "Book II," Line 26.

war, do you get it?"

"I guess so. I do relate to Your Majesty's desire. The pursuit of the betterment of one's own country and a guarantee to one's own countrymen's happiness, that could be said to be the only responsibility of a ruler. If the destruction of our people guaranteed the people of the Sorcerer Kingdom their happiness, I do understand why you did not accept our surrender. I suppose it couldn't be helped."

"Right? You get it. Now then, it is my turn for a question, but none come to the mind at the moment..."

Ainz looked around while he pondered, "Ah, right. The armor you are wearing reminded me of it, so I'll ask about that sword. The sword that Gazef Stronoff wielded, who's currently in possession of it?"

"It is currently under the safekeeping of a man named Brain Unglaus."

"Brain Unglaus? Ahh, that man."

When he dueled Gazef, there was someone by that name between the two men who had witnessed said duel. However, given how long ago that was, he could barely remember his appearance.

Although he planned to turn the capital into ashes, he still planned to recover a few items, one of which being Gazef's sword.

"That man, has he come here too?"

"No, he has not, Your Majesty. He should still be in the capital."

"Is that so? Then you would not have any issue with what kind of magic I use to destroy you all, right?"

The one in charge of sieging the capital was Cocytus so he would have to order him to watch out for the sword later.

"While I have no intention to forfeit this battle, I would be eternally grateful if Your Majesty was to use magic that would inflict the least amount of suffering on my people."

"...Hmm. You do have a point. I understand. After all, pleasant conversations like this one are hard to come by. For you especially, I shall try my best to kill you as gently as I could."

"Thank you very much."

Zanac had on him a brilliant smile to which Ainz could not help but feel amazed.

This man's courage was quite sizable. If Ainz was in his shoes, would he have been able to do the same?

—I do not think so. As expected of someone of royal blood. This has been very educational.

Zanac took the glass cup in front of him and downed the water in a single gulp, as if he were not worried about poisons at all.

"Delicious, Your Majesty. Say, I do hope you could answer one last question of mine — was Your Majesty the one who killed my brother, or was it one of Your Majesty's subordinates?"

"Your brother?"

Ainz tilted his head and after a short while, remembered the prince of the Kingdom they had already disposed of. He could not recall his name, but did remember that it was super long.

"It was probably one of my subordinates."

"Is that true... so he was dead after all... I feel like a huge weight has been lifted from my shoulders... Your Majesty, thank you for telling me. I suppose it is time for us to bid farewell."

After saying that, Zanac began walking towards his horse.

Ainz walked towards the Soul Eater after he had tidied up everything, only to find that Zanac was still waiting by his horse.

Ainz questioned in his mind why he had not already gotten onto his horse as he climbed onto the Soul Eater. Only after he had done so, did Zanac mount his horse.

Between a prince and a king, it was easy to tell who held the higher status, so he had probably done so to avoid looking down on Ainz from his high horse. To Ainz, someone who had not studied equestrian etiquette, this was the proper protocol that the aristocracy should strive to follow. Zanac's standing in his mind rose by a bit.

Looks like studying the etiquette of the upper-class has become mandatory... what isn't at this point? Will the number of things I have to learn ever decrease...?

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"Your Highness!"

The noblemen all came out to welcome Zanac back, almost every noble that had answered his call was there.

No one halted his exit from the front, yet now it felt like he could not get back

in if he tried. That meant that everybody was anticipating for good news, the best of which would be if the Sorcerer King had agreed to handic—

Zanac answered their question with a curt reply.

"I couldn't do it. His Majesty the Sorcerer King plans to kill us all, that was non-negotiable to him."

What he found to be surprising was the fact that there were still nobles who turned pale at this news. Were they still hoping that everything would turn out fine even with the current situation?

Zanac got off his horse and left those nobles, who were all biting down on their lower lip and were deep in contemplation, behind to walk towards his own tent.

After he entered the tent, the Minister of Military Affairs welcomed him, only for a sarcastic smile to surface on his face.

"That does not look like good news."

"In other words, just as we had expected, but, well, one thing did surprise a bit."

"Really? Speaking of which, I have never met with the Sorcerer King, just what kind of an evil monster was he?"

Zanac smiled.

"He was more human than I thought."

The Minister of Military Affairs was shocked at this answer, his eyes were so wide that they almost formed into circles. Perhaps that was the first time Zanac had seen him make that expression.

Zanac began recalling his time with the Sorcerer King.

It was true that on the outside, he appeared to be a terrifying monster, one that exuded an oppressive aura. Zanac could not even fathom how high of a value the clothing he wore had. Yet, even so, his only priority, the reason behind all of his actions, was for the happiness of those he held dear. Isn't that the most common of desires?

Honestly, that should not have been the reaction of an undead, the mortal enemy of the living. He was too human.

He could not understand the exact level of consideration the Sorcerer King had placed on this matter to have arrived at this conclusion, but from that bit of conversation, he could sympathize with him a little.

"Haha, yes, indeed. Just like a normal — human."

Zanac shifted his gaze from the minister to the exterior of the tent.

If say, before — before things had turned out this way, perhaps he could have thought up a better method to deal with this. But, they were past the point of no return already.

"...So, what is the status of the command hierarchy and battle preparations?"

"Your Highness' subordinates — those from the capital are ready to move out immediately, distributing our men between the capital's residences proved to be effective. The speed of the landed nobles, however, leaves much to be desired. They are still debating on who should be vanguard."

The Minister of Military Affairs ranted on without hiding his disdain.

"Hmmm, that cannot be helped. They are not under our command after all. Some of the nobles have not even made the resolve of self-sacrifice. We can only hope that they will not initiate the battle before the rest of us are ready. The lower our expectations are, the less disappointed we would be."

It was indeed troubling if they could not even synchronize amongst their own ranks for this battle. That said, without their forces, they would lose out on a quarter of their mobilized soldiers. That scenario would be equally troublesome.

Even if the Sorcerer King's magic were to only kill 200,000 like last time, assuming that half of their army and their corresponding nobles survive, just how much responsibility would fall onto a quarter of their current forces?

"So, what is our current strategy?"

"None whatsoever, Your Highness." The Minister of Military Affairs laughed in a tired and apathetic way. "We do not have a formation in mind, we will just be blindly charging into them. Because of that... If we were to do nothing to prevent the soldiers from losing their morale, that would not be good... Shall I form an anti-retreat force?"

"You shouldn't. Rather than that, the royal knights should be stationed at the front, and—"

"—Your Highness, do forgive me for speaking out of line, but let us be the vanguard."

Zanac looked towards him with a questioning gaze that asked, *are you sure*? Putting his own condition aside, it was hard for him to imagine this skinny, jaundiced man swinging a sword around.

"If someone has to stand at the front, please do allow me to be that man. Your Highness should command from the rear."

Zanac and the minister looked at each other for a while and he nodded his head.

“I am very glad that you could understand…” the minister’s gaze trailed towards the ceiling of the tent. There was neither anything of note there nor could he see the sky, yet he stared at it for a moment while he mumbled to himself.

“To be honest, I never liked that man Stronoff, yet not a day passes where I did not wish that he could be here…”

“I can sympathize with you. It’s just that, I was quite fond of him.”

Just as the minister meekly smiled, a commotion could be heard outside.

“What’s going on? Did the Sorcerer Kingdom make their move?”

“No…” Zanac raised his ear and laughed, “Not at all.”

A group of impassioned people stormed the tent.

Landed nobles whose fiefdoms were around — though a certain distance away from — the capital. Among them were the nobles who had turned pale a while ago and what appeared to be mercenaries wielding blood-stained swords.

“What do you intend to do with your drawn swords in His Highness’ tent! Fall back!”

None of the nobles answered the Minister of Military Affairs’ roar. They all looked towards Zanac like cornered rats.

Zanac wanted to hold his belly in a hearty laugh.

He more or less felt it when he entered the camp, he completely understood what thoughts their stupidity had wrought.

He had appointed the knights under him to commanding positions, so for them to have been swayed away from his side was a failure all on its own. This was a mutiny spurred on by his loss of agency, yet he did not expect them to have plotted against him especially under these circumstances. He could not have expected the rationality of humans to have stooped so low.

No, that was inaccurate.

Their actions in a sense, were correct. They were simply trying their darndest for a chance at survival.

Zanac could only have himself to blame. He was not able to empathize with them, he was not able to quench their qualms, he was not able to unite them under the same banner.

What would his father have done? Zanac almost ruined the serious face he had put on with his best efforts by laughing out loud.

“Fall back! You imbeciles!”

“…Please stop! Minister!”

“But! Your Highness!”

“I said stop! You should fall back.”

“I cannot take that order.”

“Minister—”

“—End of the line, Your Highness. There’s no use buying time now.”

“...Hmph. I was planning no such thing!”

Although he was wearing the armor that was a national treasure, Zanac was not well trained for combat. If it were his brother instead, this would have been a different story, but it was impossible for Zanac alone to slay every hostile here.

If their treachery was not the spur of the moment but instead had been well-planned from the start, he would have no chance at salvation at all.

He focused his gaze on them and saw that they were terrified.

How disgraceful. If they truly believed in themselves, they would have held their heads up high. That was why Zanac held his head up high, to convey his grit.

“So, what was so important that you must come to my tent to talk to me about? Do you not understand what it means to draw your swords here in my presence?”

“—Of course, Your Highness. This war, please forfeit it.”

Zanac smiled.

“It is a waste of time to surrender to His Majesty the Sorcerer King. I have received his message loud and clear, he will never accept our subservience... Although you might not believe me, our only hope lies in His Majesty the Sorcerer King’s defeat.”

“There’s no way we can win...”

One of the nobles mumbled and Zanac concurred.

“Even so, we have no option other than to fight. I suggested vassalage, but it was useless. I will reiterate, our only hope of survival is through battle.”

“...Perhaps that is the case for Your Highness, but, maybe if we were to contribute enough merit, they will let us live — please sacrifice yourself so that we may live.”

The noblemen began joining in agreement.

“This whole thing began because of the people who stood in the way of the Sorcerer Kingdom’s grain transport. We should not be held accountable for them!”

“We will pledge our loyalty to the Sorcerer King.”

To Zanac, what they were saying was no different than what the noblewomen would say about their ideal knight during tea parties. Still, he understood where they were coming from.

"Let me say one thing, it is useless for you to take me to him. I, as a member of the royalty, have made up my mind to battle to the end. Those of you who wish to die here, do try!"

Good grief.

Blue-on-blue, what an absolute joke.

No, he should count himself fortunate that these fools would meet their ends right here. Surely they cannot burden his sister or father after this, right?

Well, his sister would be safe from these idiots by virtue of that warrior by her side alone.

"Those who wish to claim my head, challenge me if you dare!!"

Zanac pulled his sword out and stood shoulder to shoulder with the minister.

While he had no confidence in his swordsmanship, his armor will more than make up for it.

Zanac stared at the noblemen, frozen in their tracks.

"What?! Weren't you all out for blood?! Shouldn't you have at least prepared to dirty your own hands even if you were to force poison down my throat?! Aren't you supposed to have made your resolve?!"

The nobles looked at each other.

They had not even considered that, fucking pathetic. Was his life really about to be terminated by incompetent bastards like them?

At the end of the day, after having witnessed the military might of the Sorcerer King, it must have been fear that rendered them so short-sighted to be unable to see reason.

He was not fit to rule after all. He did not have his father's virtue, his brother's charisma, or his sister's intellect. He had nothing at all, but that was fine. He did not want to be king anyways, he merely wanted this Kingdom to be functional.

That was right.

To give unto this country, its people, and his family:

Happiness.

That was all.

Then, one of the nobles called to people outside of the tent and multiple tough-looking mercenaries entered.

Zanac swirled his tongue around and recalled the silhouette of his brother

swinging a sword. He mimicked his brother's movements and charged at the noblemen.

•

In their camp, Cocytus, Aura, and Mare were just discussing the upcoming siege of the capital when Albedo, who was supposed to be conducting the final inspection of the formations, came in with a troubled expression. *What happened?* Albedo responded to his questioning gaze.

"Ainz-sama, it seems like there was some commotion in the enemy's camp."

"...What? Commotion? What happened?"

Ainz stood up and walked out of the tent. It did appear as though there was some sort of trouble there, or it was more accurate to say that a fight had broken out amongst themselves.

In the end, a group of cavalry emerged from the enemy camp. It did not appear as though they were eager vanguards.

As Ainz watched them silently, the group swiftly reached the Sorcerer Kingdom's front. They were mercenaries equipped with all sorts of equipment, as well as a few noblemen.

A man in his prime, who had the air of a noble around him, stepped forth from the group. That man began shouting almost hysterically, his voice was carried towards Ainz by the wind.

"I have matters to discuss with His Majesty the Sorcerer King! Please!"

Zanac was not among them. The commotion in their camp plus the small number of nobles in this group told Ainz all he needed to know.

"...Albedo, bring them over."

He did not look towards the bowing Albedo, but instead returned to his tent where his body fell heavily upon the temporary throne. The three guardians stood silently beside Ainz.

After a short while, ten noblemen were brought over by Albedo. The mercenaries who were serving as bodyguards had appeared to have been left behind.

They were shocked by the sight of Ainz upon his throne, more shocked by the sight of Cocytus by his side, and confused by Aura and Mare's presence.

"Do as you should in front of the one above all."

The nobles of the Kingdom took a knee near the entrance of the tent and lowered their heads towards Ainz.

"Raise your heads."

Albedo, who was now standing besides Ainz, said.

"A pleasure to make your acquaintance, Your Majesty."

The eldest of the nobles began to speak. From the others' expressions, he appeared to be the leader of this posse.

"We are in awe of Your Majesty's greatness and wish to serve under your reign. First of all, we have an offering for Your Majesty..."

One of the nobles took out a sack-like object from his back. Albedo was about to respond before Ainz stopped her. He stood up slowly — as he had practiced numerous times — from his throne and moved to the noble's side.

He was handed the sack.

Does not appear to be a trap, huh...

A disappointed Ainz looked at the sack.

The smell of blood gushed from within the sack, he could already guess what was inside.

Ainz opened it to take a look inside.

His eyes met Zanac's.

Ainz observed it in detail. They had just met, so it was hard for him to tell if this was a body double or not. However, given how they were acting, it was unlikely for this to be the head of a body double.

Ainz closed the bag, walked back to his throne to hand the sack over to Albedo, and said,

"Give him a proper burial."

He had many other corpses he could use for the creation of the undead, letting go of Zanac's was fine.

"So, what happened to the armor he was wearing?"

The nobles looked towards Ainz with baffled expressions upon hearing Ainz's question. They probably thought that the head of their general was more than enough for their prize.

"What? Do you not have an answer to Ainz-sama's question?"

"N-No! Yes, that, that armor should still be on the Prince's corpse in his tent."

The noble who acted as their representative hurriedly answered Albedo's unemotive question.

"Is that so...? I see... You all. Good job."

The nobles all responded with “Yes!” as relief bloomed on their faces and as they lowered their heads.

“I shall reward you appropriately for your accomplishment. So, what do you wish for?”

“Please spare me and my family! Your Majesty the Sorcerer King! I swear my absolute fealty to you!”

Suddenly, the noble behind the representative began yelling, prompting the annoyed representative to bark,

“This guy! Me too! Your Majesty! Please extend the same mercy to me too!”

More and more “me too!”s piled on. Ainz waved his hands magnanimously to silence their pleas.

“—I understand. I understand. I completely understand you all. Everybody here wishes for the same thing, correct?” The noble began nodding their heads furiously, “Is that so? Well, I will not kill you then. Albedo — send them to Neuronist.”

“—Understood.”

“Your Majesty, what about our families...?”

Ainz did not overlook one of the nobles attempting to whisper to him.

“Your families too?” Ainz smiled. Of course, they had no way of perceiving that. “What will I do with you all? Albedo, inquire where their families are and send them over too.”

“Yes, Ainz-sama. —You all, come over here.”

The nobles were led away from the tent by Albedo. After they were gone, Ainz motioned for Aura to come forth and gave the following order,

“To those who do not wish to die, do not grant them death. That is my will.”

“Yes, Ainz-sama!”

Ainz caught Aura’s hand as she was about to leave. He continued to the confused Aura,

“Even if they desire death, do not grant it to them for now.”

“Understood!”

After he had let go of her hand and after she had confirmed that he had no other orders, Aura ran after Albedo.

Ainz’s gaze remained fixated on her back as he gave his orders to the two remaining guardians.

“I’ve lost interest. With Cocytus as commander and Mare as second-in-command, I permit the two of you to use the full extent of your abilities. Do not

leave a single citizen of the Kingdom unscathed."

The two responded affirmative.

An hour later — the army that was the Re-Estize Kingdom's last hope disappeared completely from the face of this world.



Chapter 4 Well-Prepared Traps

1

The sound of footsteps rang as Hilma led three of her associates from the Eight Fingers along the corridor of a mansion. They were making their way towards the giant room one of the Sorcerer King's subordinates had chosen.

The rest of them were there already, awaiting the arrival of the Sorcerer King's envoy.

They did so because although the subordinate of the Sorcerer King had specified the day they had to gather at this mansion, they had not specified the specific time they had to do so. For that reason, Hilma and the rest of the Eight Fingers were on rotation in the hall to prevent a scenario in which the envoy would arrive to find it empty.

If they made the envoy wait, that would be incredibly disrespectful. There was a possibility that they would get another whiff of hell for it too. No matter how minuscule that probability was, they had to avoid it at all costs.

The four had been walking in silence for a minute now.

Although that was partially due to the sheer size of the mansion, it was also because they had furnished a room far away from the main hall to be their lounge. While it might have been better to have furnished a room closer to the

hall to be a lounge, after they had deliberated on this matter, they ultimately decided to use the rooms close to the hall as luggage storage.

The silence wasn't exactly unbearable, but one of them — Perianne Porson — began speaking.

"Isn't it a little... noisy?"

Hilma concentrated.

She could indeed hear the sound of children frolicking. That said, it sounded like something that was far too distant from the mansion. It was quiet enough that you couldn't really hear it unless you tried. This was because the hall was far removed from the hustle-and-bustle of life, that was also the reason why they had chosen to use the rooms close to the hall for storage.

Still, even if Hilma and company had not found it to be annoying, if the Sorcerer King's envoy were to be annoyed by this, they could not even imagine the consequences that would arise.

"...Maybe a little. Should we tell them to keep quiet?"

Everybody agreed with Olin. If they were to warn the people next on the rotation, the others should have warned the children by the time it was their turn to rest.

Was a weight lifted off of Olin's shoulders because he had spoken up? He proceeded to say what everybody had in mind but would have never given voice to.

"...But... Will he truly come to rescue us?"

He probably did not mean to blurt that out, but the stress from having to wait for the envoy from the Sorcerer Kingdom had probably gotten to him.

It had been seven days since the 400,000 men strong army of the Kingdom had begun their march. Not long after that had happened, they heard rumors that the Sorcerer Kingdom's army had begun encamping close to the capital. Though that was only a day ago, the mental stress they were experiencing far outweighed the physical fatigue they were experiencing too.

They had received their orders from one of the Sorcerer King's subordinates about a month ago, back when the war had just begun.

They were told, back when the Sorcerer Kingdom had begun their march towards the capital, to choose about a thousand people from the Kingdom who were loyal to them to spare so that they could serve them in the future. The chosen would then be taken to a safe location.

For that reason, a thousand people related to the Eight Fingers were gathered

at this place.

No doubt was the Eight Fingers a giant organization if you counted the grunts too. From their ranks, Hilma and the rest picked out the outstanding and loyal bunch, as well as their family members too. That was why there were children present.

What they were uncertain of, was if they would really come to save them or not.

The capos of the syndicate of the Eight Fingers were all people who had promised others that they would be spared yet would toss them away once they were no longer of use. Was it their turn this time? These thoughts lingered in their minds, doubts unshaken.

Hilma did not look towards her associates, but said,

"I believe in His Majesty the Sorcerer King's words."

Olin panicked and began saying — No, he was mortified. To Hilma, what Olin had been spouting was his distrust of the Sorcerer King's sincerity.

"I-I think so too! What I just said was not meant to discredit His Majesty the Sorcerer King."

The sound of Olin's voice covered up any sounds the children could have made as it echoed through the corridor. Olin realized what he had just done and immediately shut his mouth and lowered his head.

No one else spoke the entire way to the hall.

As the door opened, what greeted them was what they had expected: the tired smiles of their other associates.

The envoy of the Sorcerer Kingdom had not come yet.

The mixed emotion of relief and impatience arose within Hilma's heart. Surely her companions were feeling the same thing.

"You're here. Now then, we'll go rest up. If the envoy comes—"

A magic item in the form of a handbell rested where Noah Zweden was gazing at.

If one of the two was rung, the other would also ring.

However, if the distance between them were too great, it would not have an effect at all. In addition, that was the only way that both could affect each other so it wasn't exactly the best tool for communication. This task was easy enough that they could use it for this purpose.

"Ahhh, leave it to me."

As their representative, Perianne answered him.

"—Say. Do I still have to wait around here? We've wasted enough time, the Sorcerer King... His Majesty. I get it I get it. No need to look at me like that with those scary eyes."

A short and tall man said.

That was the head of the slave trade division, Cocco Doll.

The frontline of the Kingdom's army had been bolstered by the prisoners who had been kept captive in the capital. When they were being released, during the chaos and confusion of those few days, Cocco Doll had been rescued and brought to this mansion.

At first, they had two ways they could have dealt with Cocco Doll.

If he was sent to fight the Sorcerer Kingdom, they had no doubt in their mind that he would have died, so of course his rescue was non-controversial. What was controversial was how they should introduce him to the Sorcerer King.

Some thought that because he was a regular head, it would not matter if they did not introduce him at all. Others thought that if the Sorcerer King knew of him already and they were to not introduce him to him, it would end in tragedy.

They wanted to avoid endangering themselves no matter how unlikely it was, and so they went with the latter.

Their opportunity to introduce him — to place him on the chopping block — was about to come.

They were all in agreement that he was the first one they had to introduce, to remove any doubts that they were attempting to hide him.

"You have to wait here so that His Majesty the Sorcerer King's envoy can get a good look at you."

For that reason, he had to wait in this room. They did not know when the envoy was going to come after all. He ate and slept in this room and was absolutely disgusted by it.

"I mean, I have been thanking you all constantly, thanking you for bribing the guards so they wouldn't treat me so harshly in prison, and thanking you for saving me from the draft — to have saved poor, old me."

"What are you trying to say, Cocco Doll?"

To Noah's question, Cocco Doll responded with a piercing gaze.

"To go out of your way to save someone who has lost all of his power, connections, and lackeys, isn't that a bit too suspicious? What is your goal? Why have you gathered everybody related to the Eight Fingers here? Are you planning to kill me?"

"—Hah?"

Hilma was frozen solid. No, it wasn't just Hilma, everybody else in the room other than Cocco Doll was the same.

If they were equally guilty, none of them could wash their hands clean of his blood, was probably what he meant—

"W-What? Your expressions. That was bullseye... wasn't it?"

Hilma surveyed her surroundings. Everybody had the same expression, one that said, "this guy is going to be trouble soon." She spoke up as their representative.

"What are you talking about, Cocco Doll? No, Apéritif. Aren't we partners?"

"—Hah?"

This time it was Cocco Doll's turn to be shocked. His expression was whack, almost hilarious.

"You, what is your goal?! Ah, I get it, you are all monsters wearing their skins! That's why every other word out of your mouths is praise for the Sorcerer King!"

Cocco Doll yelled with an expression that was a cross between panic and fear. The monster he spoke of was a folk's tale that mothers usually used to scare their children when they were being restless at night. Most adventurers agree that no such monster actually existed.

"I thought that something was off from the start! The fact that you guys went on a diet at the same time was suspicious enough. Even if I concede that point, Hilma's figure is so inelegant! She's too skinny to be healthy. This could all be explained if you guys were just monsters wearing their skins!"

Hilma looked towards Cocco Doll with warmth in her eyes. Such bliss, to have not experienced that hell.

"Wh-what? Your expression..."

"No, don't mind me, Apéritif. Indeed. I am flattered by your observation."

"—Huh?"

"What?"

"No, no, nothing... nothing at all... I'm being serious, I am unsarcastically asking you. Are you really Hilma? Hilma Cygnaeus? Not a twin sister or something like that? Were you brainwashed?"

"Have I really changed that much?"

He wasn't talking about how skinny she had gotten. He was probably talking about her personality; she had mellowed out a lot from before. Normally, that would be a positive change, so his suspicion of her was surprising to say the least.

"...Of course, it's like you're a completely different person. No, that applies to you all. Did monsters truly steal your skins?"

"I could only say that we experienced certain things that made us this way."

Everybody agreed with what Noah had said. Cocco Doll was terrified.

"What, happened... Though I don't want to hear it, I still want to know. You—"

A thin, endless, and circular darkness suddenly appeared in the room. A semi-oval object began emerging from the ground.

Hilma recognized this as the [Gate] spell that had whisked her away so many times. It was a high-tier spell, high enough that there were no magic casters within the Kingdom who were capable of it. Only a subordinate of the Sorcerer King would be capable. The fact that this spell was cast meant that—

Hilma hurriedly took a knee. After a while, she felt Cocco Doll do the same.

Hilma buried her head and clenched her fist.

There were two possible outcomes.

They were either getting disposed of or saved.

A person's footsteps could be heard.

"You can raise your heads now."

In front of the [Gate] was a maiden whose bust size was mismatched with her apparent age. Though she had not heard her speak of her name directly, Hilma knew her name was Shalltear. No one here was brave enough to refer to her by name, even someone as clueless as Cocco Doll could tell from the atmosphere of the room alone.

"I am here to retrieve you all. Although I heard there would be a thousand or so of you ~arinsu, could you bring them over immediately ~arinsu?"

"Understood! Please wait a moment!"

Olin ran out of the room in a full sprint. He had the best stamina of them all after all.

"「—Shadow Demon.」"

Answering Shalltear's call, a demon soon materialized from the shadows. When had it entered the room? Perhaps it had been monitoring them for a long time. This was not surprising to them at all. Instead, they all thought, *thought so.*

That Shadow Demon began whispering into Shalltear's ear. They then heard her respond with murmurs. After their conversation ended, Noah began speaking with a trembling voice,

"...U-Umm... Olin will need some time to bring everyone over. Before that

happens, there is someone we wish to introduce to you. Do you find that to be agreeable?"

"Unnecessary ~arinsu. Rather than doing that, I heard you had luggage to bring along ~arinsu, move those first. I heard there were quite a lot of it, perhaps it would be faster if my servants did it for you. How about that ~arinsu?"

"C-Could we trouble you then?"

Shalltear responded with a curt, "Of course" before casting her spell. That was probably summoning magic. A few strong undead began appearing around them. Following their orders, they exited the room and returned with a sizable quantity of luggage, which they moved through the [Gate].

The luggage was moved at an unbelievable speed. Just as they were done moving, they could hear the sound of many footsteps.

While this might be the largest room in the mansion, it could not contain a thousand people.

"Now then, enter that door in your predetermined orders. Inside is a village within a forest ~arinsu. You will exit what looks like a town square. Wait there."

They followed her orders and entered the door in order.

Though it was unlikely that none of them were hesitant to enter the portal, everyone there had already been warned to follow their exact orders; as a result, there was less confusion than they had expected.

In comparison, the boys around *that* age stalling and blushing were a bigger problem. The girls becoming frustrated at the boys' reactions were an issue too.

Shalltear was a world-class beauty.

So, them falling in love at first sight wasn't such an unusual phenomenon, as was the women's jealousy.

However — Hilma had engraved a fact in her heart.

If those kids were to do something stupid, she would be the one responsible. To prevent that from happening, she had to keep a close watch on them. Her attention was especially focused on the girl whose hands were on her flat chest, attempting to compare sizes with Shalltear.

Those children's hands were taken by their guardians and led through the [Gate]. Fortunately, nothing had gone awry.

Hilma and her associates were the last to enter the [Gate]. Just as she had described, in front of them were wooden houses and their surroundings felt like a forest.

In the plaza where the undead had piled up their luggage, there was some

commotion. Or was it excitement instead? Given the amount of youths there, the latter was more likely.

Was this their reaction to their first time passing through a [Gate]?

"Attention!"

Noah yelled. Gradually — faster than she had expected — the noise died down.

Was it to let them all see Shalltear? She slowly ascended into the sky and said,

"Currently the village is still under development. You will be brought over there in around a week. Before that happens, you will be living here. Just so you could effectively manage the village, we will be lending you four Golems. If you need anything heavy moved elsewhere, let them do it. Undead currently surround the village, if you are to exit the perimeter and attempt to re-enter, they will attack you. For that reason, please do not cross the perimeter formed by the undead."

Shalltear looked around to check if they all understood her, and continued,

"Other than that, you will decide among yourselves how you will be spending this week. We have prepared two weeks' worth of food ~arinsu, so you should be set on that front. I will return in three days, if you have any issues, I will listen to them then."

Shalltear descended to the ground and looked around, her gaze fell upon Cocco Doll.

"You are one of the capos, correct ~arinsu?"

"Eh? Eeeh? W—, no, yes, what can I do for you?"

Cocco Doll had experienced the difference in status between him and her, so he tried his best to be cordial.

"You should take a trip to Kyouhukou's room too ~arinsu."

"Eh?"

Shalltear closed the old [Gate] and opened a new one.

Was it his instinct? Something told Cocco Doll that something bad was about to happen to him, causing him to look around with a helpless expression.

After her gaze met his, Hilma shifted her own away. She could not go against Shalltear's decision. The other heads were the same, no one dared to make a sound.

"Wa-Wait, Wait! No! Why are you guys reacting like this?! Save me!"

"Yeah, yeah. Let's go ~arinsu!"

Shalltear dragged a screaming Cocco Doll away. Faced with that kind of

strength, he had lost all urges to resist.

"Ahh! No! Save me!"

"Sorry, Cocco Doll."

Hilma whispered to Cocco Doll, who disappeared through the [Gate]. After that, the [Gate] disappeared.

Yet, the tense atmosphere never dispersed. They were all grasped by that suffocating silence.

A thousand people, blissfully unaware of that hell, occupied this plaza. Still, they could instinctually tell what fate awaited the Cocco Doll who had just been taken away from them. That was why none dared to move.

They understood that they had been brought to this place not out of someone's generosity and were beginning to understand exactly how terrifying this place was.

"...We couldn't save Cocco Doll."

Hilma said to Noah, who was walking over to her.

She did not want anyone else to experience that hell. That was what she had in mind, but that was impossible. An intense guilt washed over her.

"There's nothing we can do about it. Still, it does not mean death... it would be more appropriate to call it a baptism. Afterwards, he could... come to understand why we would cherish each other so much."

"Baptism... true... if I thought of it like that, it would alleviate a lot of the guilt I'm feeling."

"You two, while I can understand how worried you are for Cocco Doll, we have to discuss our future right now."

They had to relieve the people there of their worries.

Hilma took the lead.

If their goal was to kill them all, they would have done so already and not bring them all the way over here... or take Cocco Doll away.

That meant that the Sorcerer King was holding up his side of the deal, given Shalltear's actions.

"Thank you so much, Your Majesty the Sorcerer King."

Hilma lowered her head. Of course, she had no idea where she was or where the Sorcerer King was, but this was the only thing she could think of that could properly express her gratitude given her situation.

Something along the lines of a prayer.

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Three Floor Guardians set off from the front they had established in front of the capital.

The one in charge of the capital's siege, Cocytus. The one in charge of crucial facilities, Aura. And finally, the one in charge of casting offensive area-of-attack spells to render the entire capital into a mountain of ash, Mare.

The three each had their subordinates.

Mare had Hanzos under him, Cocytus had Frost Virgins, and Aura had her magic beasts.

The place they were looking towards, the capital, was awfully silent. Were they mourning? Or perhaps were they cowering in fear from the sight of the Sorcerer Kingdom's forces?

Only a few days had passed since their previous battle, yet the capital's forces were already cracking at the seams. From the vantage point of the encampment Ainz had set up near the capital, not many soldiers could be seen manning the outer walls of the city, nor did they appear to intend to put up a fight.

While it was true that they were few in numbers, Ainz's camp was equally unmanned. High-tier mercenaries were nowhere to be found, not even Nazarick's Master Guarders could be seen. The camp was occupied by Ainz, Albedo, and around ten of Ainz's Death Knights.

Albedo wore her full-body armor and held a halberd in her hands. Her World Class Item should also be on her person just as a precaution.

"...Is it about time?"

Ainz asked Albedo after the guardians had left the camp. They were spread out to surround the capital.

"It should be. The guardians have moved quite a bit of distance away. If they really wanted to take action, this would be their last chance to. Given the lack of movement from their side, while it is unfortunate, it appears that there were none here this time too."

"Is that so," Ainz replied and shifted his gaze towards the capital.

He saw a silhouette flying towards them from the capital. After he took a look around, it appeared that this was the only entity coming towards them. Someone who had the courage to challenge the Sorcerer King, the one who dismantled an

army of 200,000 with a single spell. From the intel they had collected, only one person matched that description.

The Powered Suit — probably Red Drop.

Ainz squinted his eyes to focus on the rapidly approaching entity and muttered, "Now then."

If that were the case, they could move on to the second stage of the plan. However, Ainz was a bit uneasy.

This was an important plan after all. It had to be handled carefully, like a thin sheet of ice. Was he truly capable of pulling off such a plan? Sigh, he could not have handed something this important to someone else either.

The silhouette got ever so closer. Honestly, has he not considered the possibility that they had an air force too? Or did he think that the Floor Guardians would not notice him if he was high enough? Or was it some equally stupid line of thought? Ainz was stunned by his opponent's faulty strategy. No, perhaps he knew that was the case but had no other choice.

So, did he know that this was a trap, but had the balls and resolve to break through it? Or maybe—

"—Is he clueless or prideful? Or perhaps... Whatever, that does not matter. We will find out once he reaches here."

"Indeed," Albedo replied.

"...I will leave it all to you then?"

"Yes, please leave it all to me."

Her replies were short and straight to the point. Ainz could not tell what her current mental state was. However, he knew enough to tell that she was not too happy about this.

Ainz looked back towards the silhouette. It would take him quite a while to reach where they were, they could afford to let him get closer before setting off the ambush. The moment that thought crossed Ainz's mind, he realized that he had made a mistake.

It was highly likely that he was a disposable pawn.

"Does he know what he is? Or does he have no clue at all?"

"Who knows? It does not matter if he does, the plan has entered its third stage. Are we good to go?"

"...We are all set. I will accomplish my duties to the best of my abilities, you should do the same."

"Yes — ah, no. Please leave it all to me, Ainz-sama." Albedo replied just as that

silhouette reached the Sorcerer Kingdom's front, hovering a hundred meters up in the air and about a hundred meters away from them.

He could clearly make out his opponent's appearance now. That said, it was unnecessary at this point to confirm his appearance.

The bright-red Powered Suit came to a sudden halt mid-air and remained there. Though he could not see his face, Ainz could tell that he was being observed.

Albedo raised her arm and the Death Knights around her began moving to form a shield wall in front of her.

The hovering Powered Suit's right shoulder began to draw light into a box-shaped object. The light was converted into lightning and subsequently released.

"—[Chain Dragon Lightning]."

Just as Ainz mumbled the name of the spell, the lightning had already formed into the shape of a Dragon and struck one of the Death Knights. The lightning dealt significant elemental damage to the Death Knight before leaping onto the Death Knights next to it.

After the blinding light of the lightning subsided, the undead were nowhere to be seen. They were all taken out in a single attack, which did not reach Ainz and Albedo. That was probably a coincidence rather than a calculated move from their opponent.

"Insolent fool! Identify yourself!"

Albedo roared with an infuriated tone. The volume of her voice was high enough that Ainz wanted to cover up his ears. Given how far away their opponent was, he should still be able to hear it, but he did not respond at all. Well no, he did respond, that just depended on one's definition of a response.

The next thing they knew, the weapon rack on his left shoulder activated. Light was drawn in again as another spell was cast.

A whirlwind of fire encompassed Ainz and Albedo, the turbulent wind sounded like a wolf's howl.

This was the divine area-of-attack spell, [Firestorm].

Fire was a weakness of Ainz's, but because the spell had not been enhanced through any special abilities, nor was the caster on the same level as Ainz, it did not do too much damage. Still, he could not just tank hits like that all day long.

Ainz gave out his order.

"Go! Albedo. Do not let him escape!"

"Yes!"

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Albedo took flight as she gripped tightly onto her halberd.

Her wings of pure black flapped once and it was more than enough for her to close the gap between them.

She was not sure if it was because the gap between them had been closed so fast, but the Powered Suit turned around in a stiff motion.

Albedo almost sunk her halberd into his unprotected back before the Powered Suit flew away. He did not fly towards the capital, but moved northwards instead.

Albedo recalled the geography of their surroundings.

She could not remember anything special about the direction he was heading towards, there were not any features that could facilitate an ambush.

Under her helmet, Albedo was fuming.

Seriously, do you think that we're blind? You really thought that we couldn't see through what you're trying to do? Or perhaps... If he's this confident knowing that his plans have been revealed... I have to be on alert for this...

Albedo turned her head around, shifting her gaze over her shoulder towards the Sorcerer Kingdom's encampment, where she had just been at. She could see a lone silhouette, it was Ainz by himself. Even if she was following her orders, she should have been the one to guard him, especially given that he was her last remaining master. Yet she had left her protectee behind, that deeply unsettled her.

What was more displeasing was the fact that she was not allowed to make their enemy pay for his insolence with his life.

"Tch," Albedo clicked her tongue and stared at the retreating Powered Suit.

There was an object that resembled a backpack on the back of the Powered Suit. It had six nozzles, each ejecting white light that formed into a trail, like a shooting star.

Those who are not familiar with Powered Suits would probably assume that if those nozzles were destroyed, their opponent would lose their ability to fly and thus fall to the ground.

However, Albedo's master had already told her, "That's just a cosmetic effect."

That was because a Powered Suit's flight capabilities worked in a similar fashion to the spell [Fly]. According to her master, though it was correct to say that it would not lose its ability to fly once its nozzles have been destroyed, that was not a given. Her master had added, "At least that was the case back then," implying that he had not tested out this theory himself.

Still, how long will he be flying for? We're already so far away from — the encampment? Was I his true target then?

Gradually, the gap between them was being drawn out.

If this continued on, her opponent would escape successfully.

Albedo did not have any abilities that could boost her own flight speed. Normally, when she was engaged in a chase, she would be riding her War Bicorn but that was no longer an option. That was why she was flying with her own wings, which were only capable of these speeds.

Still, Albedo had prepared for this. She had borrowed items from her master that could boost her flight speed. As long as she equipped those, she could easily close the gap between them. So why hasn't she done so already? The answer was because she was waiting to see what her opponent's next move would be.

If he were just trying to escape, Albedo could deal with that easily.

Just as she was calmly analyzing his silhouette, her opponent turned around.

He began to set up a weapon that was similar to Shizu's Arcane Rifle.

"Hmph."

Albedo prepared herself for an attack while mocking her opponent.

Compared to Shizu's assault rifle type Arcane Rifle, this enemy's Arcane Rifle was more of a heavy machine gun type according to Cocytus. Its destructive capabilities were a tier above Shizu's weapon.

A low rumbling sound accompanied the large number of bullets being fired from the weapon.

Those bullets were larger than an acorn and were shot out at blazing speeds, it was difficult for her to dodge them all.

However, Albedo could at the very least, redirect a few of the bullets back at him. Not only would this damage the opponent's weapon, the damage of Albedo's halberd was added on to it as well. Combined with the damage she could deal with her skills, this should deal a considerable amount of damage to the enemy.

Yet — Albedo did not activate any special abilities. She tightened her grip on her halberd and closed the distance between her and the enemy, nothing more.

She intended to take the full brunt of the attack with her own body.

The bullets fired by the enemy were about to connect with Albedo's armor—

Oops... that was a big miscalculation...

—She had thought that her armor would mitigate most of the damage, but there wasn't even a need for that.

None of the bullets struck her, they all curved away.

It seemed likely that none of the bullets were enchanted.

At the Floor Guardians' level, one would have complete immunity to unenchanted projectiles. If his weapon had not been enchanted, he should not have equipped it at all.

I wanted to test the destructive capabilities of his weapon... but ended up exposing one of my abilities. Given that, he would surely use an enchanted attack next...

From his body language, Albedo's keen sight could tell that he was quite shaken. Still, things progressed the way she had expected it to. Her opponent let go of his Arcane Rifle and extended something forwards.

His next attack appeared to be magic-based.

"Good, now what?" As she pondered. Albedo did not use any special ability of hers as she shortened the distance between them. If she had, even give the current distance between them, he would still be in her strike range. However, Albedo did not wish to expose her hand yet.

From the enemy's right hand, a brilliant green light shot out, flew towards Albedo, and struck her.

Suddenly, Albedo's body — and armor — began glowing with the same light. However, the light did not have any effects and soon disappeared.

She was not hurt. In fact, she did not feel anything at all.

This was not because she was actively defending against that spell, but because that spell could not even get through Albedo's passive magic resistance.

It was likely that this was one of her master's specialties, necromancy, specifically an instant-death spell.

Those types of spells were not only affected by ability scores, passive skills, special skills, and equipment abilities, but were also affected by resistances gained through levels, penalties, and so on. If they were cast on an opponent of similar level, it would be hard for those spells to have any effects at all if they were not enhanced through any means.

Not only was Albedo created as a level 100 NPC, she had equipped multiple items that strengthened herself. Spells of that Powered Suit's level could not

affect her at all.

Perhaps he was trying to gauge the difference in strength between them, and that was why he took the gambit of an instant-death spell. But, the fact that her opponent had even thought that this lowly spell could serve as an equalizer between them pissed Albedo off.

She had to show him what she was made of!

As she rapidly approached her enemy, Albedo raised her fist for a punch.

She intended to make a mockery of her opponent by not using the halberd in her hand. Another reason for the punch was that she could not accurately gauge the amount of damage he took if she were to use the halberd.

Her opponent attempted to block it with the Arcane Rifle, but Albedo's strike was much faster.

Even though she held back a little, a hit from the level 100 Albedo was still devastating.

Gooong! A metallic noise rang out as her opponent was sent flying.

The suit, taller than 3 meters, was sent flying by Albedo's punch despite her being an entire meter shorter than it. Not only was it sent flying, it also began shaking uncontrollably. It was a hilarious sight to behold.

...Looks like I dealt more damage to it than expected. He's more delicate than tofu...

He was certainly, unexpectedly—

Weak...

—Albedo felt frustrated as she laughed.

"—Ahahaha, now you will understand how foolish you were to attack Ainz-sama! I will dismember all four of your limbs, break every tooth in your mouth so you cannot even end yourself by biting off your tongue... but perhaps I will allow you to get another hit in. In any case, I will bring you to Ainz-sama to apologize for your crimes."

"—Tch!"

Albedo heard a click from that man's mouth.

"Did you just click your tongue at me...? How rude. Never mind, you were such an indignant bastard that you chose to attack us without declaring your own name, I expected this much insolence from you."

"What are you talking about? Slayer? There is no indignity in vanquishing evil pieces of shit like you."

"Tsk. I thought you were an illiterate barbarian to have attacked us without saying anything at all. I did not expect... no wait, the citizens of the Kingdom are

no different from barbarians anyway, right?"

"That's rich coming from you, Prime Minister of the Sorcerer Kingdom, Albedo."

Albedo calculated the pros and cons of dragging this conversation on and concluded that this was an exploitable situation.

If it were Ainz-sama or Demiurge here, they could probably engage him in a better conversation...

Albedo was confident in dealing with matters of interior affairs, but she was not too confident in her skills to plot or deal with matters of foreign affairs. Still, she was alone with no help at all so she had to rely on her own head.

"Nonsense, whatever of Red Drop? Sorry, I do not commit mere adventurers' names to memory."

"Hmph, how is someone like you fit to be the Prime Minister of a state."

Was he truly one of Red Drop? Or was he trying to confuse Albedo?

In any case, Albedo had to continue the conversation. From her strike back there, she had already grasped the full extent of her opponent's capabilities. Even if their fight were to resume, she would not have issues dealing with him at all.

Albedo mentally prepared herself to trap him in this conversation.

What a tiresome way to buy more time...

After all, to not rouse her opponent's suspicion, Albedo had to perfectly emulate the character of an arrogant strongman.

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Albedo's silhouette shrunk gradually as she chased after the red Powered Suit.

And now, Ainz was the only one remaining at the encampment. If all went according to plan, the main event should be starting soon.

Ainz cast the spell, [Body of Effulgent Beryl].

Those who wish to destroy Ainz, even if they knew little of the weaknesses of skeletal type monsters, would know to use weapons that dealt bludgeoning damage. If Ainz was to lose a significant chunk of HP due to his weaknesses before he achieved his goal, that would be somewhat troubling.

And then, the [Delay Teleportation] Ainz had cast before, took effect.

In other words, things were indeed proceeding as he had predicted.

It seemed like Albedo was not their target after all. Ainz was relieved. If she was their target instead, things would have gotten quite difficult.

But — was that really the case? Could this be a double-layered trap?

The enemy was teleporting behind Ainz.

A single enemy.

Someone who preferred close-quarters combat.

While his opponent was being delayed, Ainz cast an [Explode Mine] spell on the teleportation destination. Afterwards, he stood still, waiting for his opponent to arrive. At first, he had planned to use [Life Essence] to confirm if they had lost health, but ultimately decided against that.

He heard the sound of the explosion the moment his opponent arrived.

Ainz immediately began moving forwards, away from his enemy, and turned around.

"Silver... no wait, the luster is different. Is that platinum? Or a metal I do not know of?"

The explosion kicked up quite a bit of dust and at its center, stood a set of platinum-colored full-body armor.

Four weapons hovered around them, following their every move.

A spear, a katana, a hammer, and a greatsword.

All of them were oversized for humans, their appearance screamed form-over-function. Nazarick's treasury held many more weapons similar to these.

The weapons had a similar luster as the armor, it was then highly likely that they were not silver, but platinum instead.

Given that was the case however, it created more questions than it answered. Ignoring the monetary value of the precious metal, platinum had no special magical properties at all. He could not fathom what advantages could be granted by creating weapons and armor out of it.

The most likely explanation was that it was only platinum-coated, to hide the true metal the equipment was made out of. An example he could think of was the Golem he had just learned was in Kyouhukou's room. There were other examples of the same technique being used in Nazarick as well.

The next most likely explanation was that it was a metal that was identical to platinum in appearance — but Ainz was not well-versed in the types of metal in this world.

Ainz's undivided attention was on his opponent's every move. After all, even trivial intel could tip the balance of a fight.

What was unsettling to him was the fact that his opponent, since their debut, had not shown any emotional response at all. Since their appearance, they had stood still in one spot with a daunting pose. Was it because they had not taken any damage — they had not bled at all — that they had resorted to such showmanship?

It was impossible for them to have not taken any damage at all.

It was hard for Ainz to believe that it had taken the full brunt of his [Explode Mine] but all it did was sully that eye-catching armor with dust. Even with Ainz's necromancy job classes, it was still impossible for him to gain complete immunity to the damage of a high-tier spell. It was impossible without underhanded tricks, especially because [Explode Mine]'s damage type was non-elemental, it could not have been nullified so simply.

In that case, did their carefree attitude stem from them toughing it out, or was it from their do-or-die resolve? Or perhaps — they really had an ability to nullify the damage.

"Did you think that I would just stand here without taking any precautions? There are more around you—"

He tried to gauge his opponent's reaction through conversation, or at least that was what he had intended anyways. His opponent however, did not give him much chance to speak, as the armored fellow unabashedly took an offensive stance. The hammer in their arsenal floated to where they could easily grab it.

That revealed a piece of intel to Ainz, causing him to gently laugh deep down in his heart.

This meant that their target was not Albedo, but Ainz himself.

Since they had not bothered to converse with Ainz at all, they were not trying to buy time. They were probably planning to end this fight before any backup could arrive.

If they had appeared from the sky and began talking to him, that would have meant that their target was Albedo or that they were both their targets.

Everything up till this point had occurred well within the margins of Ainz's plan.

However, not even Ainz could predict his opponent's next move.

Since their weapons moved with them, he had thought that they were the fighter type and would want to close the distance between them. Instead, his opponent moved his hand in a somatic gesture, causing the giant hammer to suddenly shoot forward.

So fast!

It was like a high-level warrior had lobbed it at him, Ainz could not dodge it at all. If this weapon were not enchanted, it would be nullified by his immunity to non-enchanted projectiles, but no matter which way Ainz sliced it, it had to be enchanted. If that was the case, Ainz stood still, mimicking the stance his opponent had adopted as he took the hit. Of course, the spell activated the moment the hammer connected with Ainz's body.

The bludgeoning damage was completely nullified by the [Body of Effulgent Beryl] spell. His gaze had remained on his opponent this entire time, observing his every move. In that moment, his opponent stopped moving, probably out of shock that he had taken zero damage.

The hammer returned to its original position as fast as it had been launched, floating around the enemy.

"Muwahahahaha—"

Ainz laughed loudly with his arms extended outwards to show that he was unscathed.

"—Do you understand now? As I am sure you are aware, skeletons are weak to bludgeoning attacks. That is true for me as well. So did you really believe that I would not take precautions to mend this vulnerability? That I would be so foolish? ...That's right—"

Ainz patted his own body, "—I am immune to all bludgeoning damage."

While he was sneering, his opponent did not seize the opportunity to attack. *What does that mean?* Ainz contemplated. If he made a mistake here, he might not be able to salvage the situation.

The enemy landed, raised a hand, and spoke. Their voice was that of a male's.

"World Isolating Barrier!"

With his foe as the origin, a — space-warping — shockwave passed by Ainz.

If it continued to expand in its initial form, this place would be encompassed in a dome. Its size was immense, at least a kilometer wide. Albedo and the other guardians should all be outside of its range.

Ainz's mind spooled up as he deliberated.

This was one of the oldest tricks in the book, to cut off an enemy's connection to the outside world. Then, how hard would it be to break in? Would it be able to prevent someone from running in? Would teleportation still work?

Its effect and area-of-effect also had to be considered. Since it was a dome, could someone enter it through the ground?

And most important of all, could he destroy it through any means?

He was severely lacking in intel and thus could not be certain of anything, but he could at the very least make some rudimentary inferences.

First of all, his opponent knew that Ainz was a magic caster for sure, so this should at the very least be able block teleportation spells.

Unless he had a reason to not use the World Class Item that could dominate minds, this person was not the one who brainwashed Shalltear. What if there was a specific reason why he did not use it? Questions continued to pile on, but one thing he was certain of was that he should not underestimate this enemy.

That was because Ainz had mastery over a wide range of spells and special abilities. From the experience he had gathered through experimentation, he knew their full capabilities. This placed Ainz at the top of Nazarick in terms of battle tactics.

However, the ability this enemy had just used, Ainz could not recall. An ability that would cover this much ground had to be from a Super-Tier spell or a World Class Item. This meant that his opponent had easy access to — and immediate use of — skills that could rival the heights of those abilities.

He was undoubtedly a strong enemy.

Someone who could remove Ainz, and the other level 100 Floor Guardians, from the picture.

However, faced with this enemy, Ainz did not emote at all.

Of course, Ainz's face could not emote anyways, but his uncertainty could still be observed through his attitude and tone. Ainz Ooal Gown would never do something so unsightly.

At the same time, he could not allow the enemy to perceive Ainz's joy and relief.

The thought of *it was wise for me to have been the one to face him* came to mind.

Ainz squinted his eyes and continued to observe him.

Though this was an unknown ability, he could still pick up on certain aspects of it. First, this was an ability that expended HP and quite a lot of it. Given that, this barrier could not be cosmetic only. If he could not figure out its exact effects, he would be in deep trouble.

Ainz had seen his opponent's immediate loss of HP when he had activated that ability through his [Life Essence] spell. [Mana Essence] picked up nothing in contrast, meaning that his foe was of a pure warrior build with no mana at all.

If the mysterious enclosure was an inescapable prison, it would not be odd for

his opponent, who had effectively imprisoned Ainz in this dome, to relax a little.

Ainz began to calmly ask a question with that in mind.

He used an uncharacteristically gentle tone given he had just been smacked with a hammer.

"I will pardon your prior ambush. I do believe that you already know my name, but do allow me to re-introduce myself. I am the Sorcerer King Ainz Ooal Gown. Now then, it is your turn. Could you tell me your name?"

After a few seconds of silence, he received a reply.

"...Riku Agneía."[17]

Ainz immediately began to analyze the information he had just gained.

The likelihood that this barrier not only prevented his escape, but also prevented reinforcements from making their way in just increased drastically. The fact that he would risk exposing intel meant that he was trying to tell him, "you can't escape," and also, "your reinforcements won't make it in."

In the documents compiled by Sebas and Demiurge, there were no mentions of the name "Riku." Someone this strong would not have slipped through their information gathering network. Even if he was a hermit, there were still things that could not be explained. In any case, someone this strong would have surely ended up in the Kingdom's history books. For there to be no records of him at all was absurd.

The most likely explanation was that he had been given an alias.

But why would he give him an alias?

If he was from the Kingdom, he should have proudly declared his name and his intention to destroy the root of all evil that had started this war. Was it because he was someone who wished to remain anonymous of his own volition? Another possibility was that he was trying to draw Ainz's aggression towards the real Riku Agneía, or perhaps the knowledge of his true name gave Ainz power over him or something.

Although it was essentially pure wilderness when those lands came under his rule, they had still gathered quite a bit of intel from the demi-human residents of that land. Of the intel they gained, one was about the connection some had between their true name and soul, and how one could become more susceptible to curses should their true name become known. However, after much

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17. Riku (陸) means "land" and Agneía (*αγνεία*) means "purity." PDL's alias translates to "Land of the Pure," which complements his self-appointed role as World Protector.

investigation by Nazarick, they could not find conclusive proof of such a phenomenon. They had relegated this intel as plain folk legend.

So was it possible that Riku was of a tribe that held similar beliefs?

He had little to no intel. This was not the most ideal situation for him to make deductions here and there. As far as he could remember, there were only two powerful beings with connections to platinum. One of which was not a humanoid, the other was—

"I have heard through the bards' songs, the heroic tale of the Thirteen Heroes. Quite a few of their names have been lost, though I do recall one of them wearing a suit of armor forged in platinum... If I remember correctly, his name was Riku Agneía. Will those bards not be elated to find out that their tales were true?"

"Would they? I did not know that I was renowned enough for bards to sing of my name."

His foe did not shrug, nor did he make any movements as he answered calmly.

Was he truly one of the Thirteen Heroes, or was he an imposter? There might be details that he was missing.

Good grief, Ainz thought.

What was true and what was false, it was hard for him to tell. But, given how his opponent was confident enough in himself to face off against the Ainz Ooal Gown who could handily defeat an army of 200,000 with a single spell, the full extent of his capabilities must be explored in this battle.

"Riku, do you mind me addressing you by this name?"

"Denied."

An immediate answer, one filled with palatable disgust in tone.

"That was rude of me. Perhaps that was too familiar of an address. Shall I refer to you as Agneía then? Would you still mind?"

"That is fine."

"Oh. Well then, I have a proposal for you. Become my subordinate, how about it?"

The air around Riku froze a bit. He did not take a stance, nor did he move at all. Riku just stood there completely unfazed.

Ainz could not figure him out.

If Riku viewed him as an inferior, it would make sense why he did not take a stance at all. After all, Cocytus was the same during his battle with the lizardmen. So, was Riku looking down on him or not?

He felt different compared to Cocytus back then.

So, perhaps that already *was* the stance he intended to take for this battle.

He might have planned to stand in one place and have his floating weapons do all of the work for him, which was why he had adopted such a battle stance.

"...Looks like I've been rejected. How regretful. Could I implore you once more? I am currently trying to recruit powerful individuals into my ranks. Even that Momon of Darkness has been serving happily under my employ. If you are willing to become my subordinate — I would even end my conquest of the Kingdom right here. You alone are worth more than this entire country."

"Denied."

If words could kill, Ainz would have been slain instantly. There was not a single shred of hesitation in his voice.

Without showing any emotion, Ainz began to ponder the hidden meanings behind their little back-and-forth just now.

Even if he had the confidence that he could defeat Ainz and save the Kingdom, did he truly have no doubts or hesitations? Even if Ainz was killed, was he truly certain in his belief that the Sorcerer Kingdom's army would just give up?

...Perhaps he does not care about the Kingdom after all...? Is he from another nation?

"Cloak of Light!"

Riku's armor began glowing. For a brief moment, Ainz thought that it was the Sun reflecting off of his armor until he noticed that Riku's HP had just decreased. That was undoubtedly the activation of some sort of ability.

Now he had concrete proof.

Riku's abilities were powered by his own health pool.

However, because lost HP could just be recovered through restoration spells or potions, abilities that were powered by HP were usually weaker by comparison. All in all, the higher the ability's HP cost, the stronger it would be. The same logic should apply even in this world.

Riku had activated his special ability, that meant their parley had broken down. Ainz immediately cast his spell.

"[Greater Teleportation]."

Ainz teleported all the way to — the edge of the translucent dome. After his sight had adjusted, he found the translucent barrier blocking his way.

"Teleportation failed..."

He took a look around. It appeared as though Riku did not have the ability to follow him through his teleport, he was nowhere to be found.

In the direction Ainz was looking towards, an unknown distance away, was his

intended destination, the Great Underground Tomb of Nazarick.

He could at least confirm one thing of this barrier: it cut off teleportation completely. That said, since he was now in front of the barrier, that meant that teleportation to destinations within it was still possible. Only teleportation in and out of the dome was disabled. It seemed like if one were to try and teleport outside, they would instead be teleported to the edge of the dome closest to their intended destination.

This was crucial intel.

He had originally intended to not use teleportation throughout this battle, but it was still worth it to have gained this intel at the cost of one of his trump cards.

Ainz then extended his hand to touch the barrier.

If it had defensive capabilities, he would probably receive the damage immediately, but that was unlikely. He thought so because the interrupted teleportation did not do damage to him either.

The bones in his finger made contact with the barrier.

Contrary to its soft appearance, it was extremely hard. When he tried to exert force on it, it did not bend in the slightest, never mind break. It was like a wall that separated worlds apart.

Ainz pulled out a common gold coin and tossed it.

The coin hit the barrier and bounced off.

Next, he cast a [Lightning] spell at a pre-calculated angle.

"...It cannot get through, hmmm."

Just as he became satisfied with the results of his experiments, the [Delay Teleportation] spell activated once again. No doubt it was Riku.

Ainz cast [Body of Effulgent Beryl] and stood there, with his back towards Riku.

After Riku showed up, he used some unknown object to slam into Ainz's body at high speeds. Because it was bludgeoning damage, it was completely nullified by [Body of Effulgent Beryl].

But for whatever reason, his body was sent flying and pressed against the barrier. That was highly unusual. Normally when an attack's damage had been nullified, its secondary effects would not apply. However, Riku's attack did not follow this rule. So what did that mean? He had no idea as of yet.

Ainz slowly, and regally, turned around.

The hammer returned to Riku's side. The four weapons that surrounded Riku were different from before: they were all glowing white. Combined with the

armor, they looked undeniably badass.

On the other hand, Riku's health had decreased even further.

He had lost more health than when he activated that ability on his armor just then. Was it because he had to apply that ability to each weapon separately or because teleportation had cost him a bit of HP too? Ainz desired more intel.

"I am immune to bludgeoning damage, I believe I have said that already... so how did you do that?"

"...Even if you can teleport, you cannot use it to escape this barrier. Your fate is to perish here."

Just answer the question already, Ainz thought but did not say it out loud. After all, if he wanted his opponent to talk, he had to avoid pressuring him too much.

"I see. I am impressed that you could create such an inescapable barrier. I assume then that you have made your resolve already?"

No response. One of the four weapons, the greatsword, stopped moving.

—He is coming.

Riku did not appear to wish to converse with him. Ainz made the first move with that in mind.

"[Twin Magic – Obsidian Sword]!"

Ainz summoned two obsidian swords and rushed at Riku.

If his opponent used floating weaponry, he would do the same.

One of the swords was deflected by Riku's greatsword and the other's strike was dodged in an unnatural manner.

"What?!"

Ainz could not help but vocalize his thoughts.

What was shocking was not the fact that Riku could dodge the attack, but rather how he had dodged it. Not even Cocytus would be able to pull off what Riku just did.

Riku had performed a sideways somersault at head's height to dodge the attack. Although there were other oddities apart from what he had just done, Ainz should not be focusing on those details right now. The questions laid in the fact that those movements were inhuman.

Normally when a humanoid jumped, they would bend their knees and apply force on them. There should be reflexive movements before the actual jump. However, Riku skipped all of that, applied no force at all, yet still performed a sideways somersault in the same stance he had this entire time.

While it was not impossible, especially with spells like [Fly], not even Ainz

could pull it off. One's body would always reflexively move in a certain manner when performing such actions.

Perhaps those who were adept at using [Fly] would be able to do those moves, but Ainz still felt weirded out by those movements. The explanation for it was just on the tip of his tongue, but his brain could not express it properly.

While Ainz was getting increasingly annoyed, Riku counterattacked with his greatsword. Ainz's two swords were deflected by the other weapons floating around Riku.

The greatsword, as if it had a mind of its own, flew towards Ainz, prompting him to think of his Guild Weapon. Ainz cast defensive magic in response.

"[Wall of Skeleton]."

The greatsword clashed with the newly created wall. The [Wall of Skeleton] was destroyed in a single hit.

"Impressive."

In place of where the [Wall of Skeleton] stood, the honed edge of the greatsword pointed towards Ainz as it hovered. He had thought that it would return to Riku's side after that, but instead it flew towards Ainz as if someone were wielding it. On the contrary, Riku was standing still in his original position, in his original pose.

From his observation of that pose, what had been at the tip of Ainz's tongue finally came out.

Indeed, he was just like a puppet.

Riku was moving around like a puppet whose strings were still intact.

It was as though giant hands were behind him, one controlling the body and the other controlling the weapons.

This isn't something like [Psychokinesis] *controlling the weapons, but the armor too? Unless, the insides are empty? Or was a living person within it too?*

Faced with the greatsword's cleave from top to bottom, Ainz pulled out a Blasting Staff to intercept it.

The amount of pressure exerted on him made him feel as though he was sinking into the ground.

If he had weapon destruction skills, it would be worth his time to target this greatsword specifically, but Ainz had not bothered to learn such skills. Even anti-material acid spells would take quite a bit of time to chew through this sword, so he was better off attacking Riku instead.

"[Grasp Heart]!"

That was Ainz's favorite necromancy spell, yet it had no effect on Riku at all.

Did he have immunity against necromancy? Or was it resistance against negative status effects? While Ainz was still considering those things, the greatsword was swung at him at even greater speeds.

"Guhhh!"

He could neither tank nor dodge it in time, so his body took the full brunt of that attack. After receiving the blow, Ainz backed off a little only to bump against the barrier behind him. This position was disadvantageous for him.

"[Greater Teleportation]."

Ainz teleported upwards. Because they were summoned through non-conventional summoning magic, the two swords soon returned to Ainz's sides.

As he was right above his opponent, he would have been easy to spot. Ainz did not teleport a long distance away, nor did he intend to buy time until Albedo arrived. This battle was what he had been craving.

Just as a precaution, he cast [Body of Effulgent Beryl] again while observing Riku, who appeared to be a dot from his perspective. He began to ascend as soon as he spotted Ainz.

He did not try to attack Ainz with his weapons, that was probably due to a range restriction.

Ainz responded by descending.

The moment they passed by each other, he threw out the twin obsidian swords.

The [Obsidian Sword] constructs could only be used as an offensive tool and could not be used to defend oneself. That was because the obsidian swords suffered from a mass loss of durability if used to receive an opponent's attack. If used defensively, the swords' durability would rapidly diminish until they shatter.

Riku used the weapons around him to deflect the two swords that were soaring through the skies.

Did he put his all into defense? Riku did not choose to counterattack.

After brushing past Riku, Ainz landed on the ground only to find the spear falling towards him at ludicrous speed.

Ainz leapt forward, barely dodging the attack. Because he had [Fly] activated already, he did not have any issues getting back on his feet.

Ainz stood up to distance himself away from that spot as Riku casually descended to the ground. His three weapons floated around him and the spear

that had been implanted into the ground soon joined their ranks again.

Ainz also had his two obsidian swords float by his side.

His movements made it all the less believable to Ainz that a living being was in that armor. His knees did not bend at all when he landed.

It was at this time when Riku, who had been standing with the same pose this entire time, suddenly took the greatsword into his own hands.

This distance between them was closed in an instant. This was the fastest speed he had moved at yet.

He was like a shooting star.

Ainz sent out the two obsidian swords to intercept Riku's attack, but they were deflected by Riku's katana, subsequently falling onto the ground.

"[Call Greater Thunder]!"

Multiple streaks of lightning converged on Riku, yet he did not slow down at all. It was not as though he had not taken damage, Ainz could see his HP pool falling. It was more likely that he had suppressed all forms of pain.

The greatsword was raised high above Ainz's head as it was cleaved downwards.

"Oooof!"

The moment Ainz took damage, he saw from the corner of his eye, Riku's katana swinging in from the side.

Ainz began swinging his Blasting Staff.

Riku tanked that attack with his own body. A magic caster's physical strikes were not so impressive, so if he chose to tank that hit, he must be planning to strike Ainz too.

His deduction was correct.

If Ainz were in his shoes, he would have done the same.

However, that was a terrible, terrible mistake under these circumstances.

Ainz smiled deep down as the shockwave began propagating outwards. Riku was knocked far away.

Blasting Staff had a similar enhanced knockback enchantment as Yamaiko's Female Sensei's Iron Fist of Wrath. The cost of that enchantment was the staff's complete lack of offensive capabilities, but it granted distance between a magic caster and their foe, one of the most important things to a caster.

Was it because he had been knocked back? The katana's strike only grazed Ainz by a little, barely touching his sternum.

Riku remained unyielding in pose even after he was knocked back. Ainz cast

another spell.

"[Summon Undead – 10th]!"

The one to replace the twin obsidian swords was the level 70, melee warrior Doom Lord. A rusted crown sat on his dome and a blood-stained cape hung off his back. Adorning his full-plate armor were multiple scythe-like curved blades.

Minute amounts of negative energy ebbed from the gaps in its armor in the form of a foul black smog. His health was constantly decreasing, a penalty placed upon the Doom Lord for its agility which was unthinkably high for a level 70. Optimal use of such a summon required mastery over unit placement.

However, Ainz just wanted him to be his shield, so none of that mattered to him.

Summons' were either used as shields or swords.

Magic casters who could use them were all pretty strong in general. That said, a powerful pure warrior build could easily ignore these summons.

For example, what would Cocytus do?

He would probably kite the summons towards the summoner to bring the both of them into his range.

What would Albedo do?

She would probably use her defensive capabilities to her advantage to charge straight for the caster, completely ignoring the summons. She could also redirect aggro so that they would kill each other.

So, what would Riku do? Riku's tactic up till this point had been to rely on his auto-attacking weapons. Though he had wielded his greatsword, he had not used any special abilities or martial arts to go along with it. For that reason, Ainz did not have a firm grasp on his abilities as a warrior at all.

That was why—

Riku closed the distance between them and beelined for Ainz without hesitation at all. An adamant action.

He was probably the type to have specialized in super close-quarters combat rather than purely relying on his floating weapons. For that reason, if he were able to swiftly destroy his summon, Ainz would have lost an option to widen the distance between them.

Faced with the rapidly approaching Riku, the Doom Lord tightened his grip on his weapon, a long, curved blade set upon a pole, a War Scythe. The scythe was shrouded in negative energy, shrouded in the same black smog as before.

Ainz used the magical link he had with the Doom Lord to give it his orders.

“It is highly probable that our opponent is not a living creature, but try to confirm it anyways,” his order was vague. Needless to say, a summon possessed a portion of its summoner’s knowledge, so it should have understood his intentions even without his order, but it was better to veer on the safer side of things.

The Doom Lord activated its special ability.

[Ruinous Night].

The rate at which the black smog spewed out of it increased, spreading to its surroundings.

Its HP was falling faster than ever, the cost for a short-term boost to every one of its combat related stats.

Not only that, an opponent’s passive ability to reduce the amount of damage the Doom Lord dealt to it due to level difference would be completely nullified. Undead that stood in the black smog — including the Doom Lord itself — would take less damage from Light and Holy Elemental attacks. The same applied for bonus damage due to the difference in karma. Another strength of this ability was the fact that it could be triggered simultaneously on top of other buffs.

Ainz wanted to receive that buff too, but the black smog only reached so far.

To make sure that he would not be targeted by Riku, Ainz pulled away from the two combatants.

He had made preparations to be a spectator.

It was time for him to understand the true extent of Riku’s power.

The Doom Lord’s scythe clashed with the floating greatsword, and an ear-piercing noise echoed around.

Neither backed off a single step, nor were they knocked back.

They must have had similar levels of strength for that to happen.

After that, the scythe continued to clash against the katana at high speeds, their metallic rings droned on.

The greatsword’s hack was rendered inert by the scythe and the scythe’s pierce was blocked by the shield-like hammer. The darting spear was deflected by the scythe’s handle as the Doom Lord gracefully dodged the greatsword’s cleave.

Soon enough — to take advantage of the distance created by the dodge — Riku leapt forward.

Both were on equal footing in terms of offensive and defensive capabilities, but Riku had more tricks up his sleeve.

"[Negative Burst]!"

Black rays of unholy light pulsed out from Ainz as the spell quickly swallowed up its surroundings.

The Doom Lord healed upon receiving the negative energy, but it was not the most mana-efficient way to heal. On the other hand, Riku did not take damage from the spell at all.

For him to have taken zero damage, was it because he had immunity to negative energy? Was it a racial trait? Or was it a job trait? Or perhaps, the most likely explanation, was that it had something to do with his equipment.

To have planned to fight against the undead Ainz meant that by common sense, he must have prepared against negative energy attacks, a staple of the undead. Even Ainz would equip items that bestowed fire resistance if he were to fight against a fire-breathing Dragon.

While the sounds of their weapons colliding with each other rang out non-stop, Ainz cast his next spell.

"[Perfect Unknowable]."

Ainz, now an unknown, came out of the shadow of his tank, the Doom Lord, to circle around them. Suddenly, the katana flew towards him at a speed he could not dodge. It pierced through his robe at the abdomen region.

He did not take any damage due to his immunity to piercing damage, but Ainz still scuttled behind the Doom Lord's figure. The katana, suspended mid-air, then began to slash towards the Doom Lord instead.

"...He could see through [Perfect Unknowable], huh?"

This was not surprising; one would not need to reach Ainz's level to gain a couple of countermeasures against that strategy. The problem laid in what method he had used to detect him. Ainz had no answers. There were just too many countermeasures, too many for him to narrow it down with the intel he had.

So, what should his next move be? Riku seemed to want to target Ainz directly given how the levitating weapons were all pointed at him, but with the Doom Lord's presence, they could not reach him at all.

After rough calculations of his available options given the current status of the battle, he arrived at the conclusion that he should be spamming offensive spells. If the Doom Lord fell, he could just summon another. The likelihood of this strategy to win was quite high.

However, this was not the way Ainz wanted to end this.

Riku was a powerful foe, something of a rarity in this world, and with myriad abilities foreign to Ainz. Given that was the case, it was better for him to witness the full extent of Riku's power over the course of this battle so that he would be better prepared should a similar foe show up in the future.

Ainz cancelled the cast of an attack spell.

While he knew that his priority right now should be on his own defense, he had a specific reason to not do so. It was dangerous, sure, but he had to resist the urge.

Ainz observed the two's attacks and defenses. The Doom Lord was being suppressed ever so slightly, but neither were taking significant damage.

One could call the blows that they were exchanging a back-and-forth, but the simplicity in Riku's fighting style was quite worrying. Ainz knew exactly why the Doom Lord could not gain the upper hand. None of its skills, negative energy attacks, or spiritual attacks had any effects against Riku.

At this point, it was all but confirmed that Riku was of a race that had similar properties as Golems or other Constructs. Perhaps it was some item ability or skill that gave him said properties, or perhaps he was just a plain Construct.

In terms of which option was most likely, it had to be the first one given that Riku was able to talk. Half-Golems or similar races had the same resistances as other Constructs, so he might be a member of one of those races.

Although, why would someone of those races be helping out the Kingdom? What mattered the most in the moment were Riku's abilities and not his motivations. Why was he using such simple attacks? He appeared to have neither used skills nor martial arts the entire time.

One of the Supreme Beings was a Golem user. Riku's movements were nearly identical to the Golems controlled by that person.

Riku would be easy to deal with if he was a Half-Golem, but if he was a pure Golem with speakers attached or made through secret techniques, things would be much more difficult.

As far as Ainz knew, a Golem's strength scaled with the value of metal used to construct them, the creator's abilities, and the data crystals added.

High-tier Golems were relatively costly to manufacture.

If Riku was a Golem, one constructed out of a metal as cheap as platinum yet was this strong, there might be more than a few or even dozens of him laying around.

He had to collect more intel.

Ainz gave the Doom Lord an order.

The Doom Lord began releasing more black smog upon receiving his command.

Its speed and offensive capabilities were raised even further, to the point where Riku's armor began to take damage. However, the rapid loss of HP on the Doom Lord's part caused it to disappear not long after.

Ainz had timed for this, as he cast another [Summon Undead – 10th].

It was a level 68 undead, an Elemental Skull.

Its appearance was of a floating skull, surrounding it was a magical haze of light that constantly switched between four colors: red, blue, green, and yellow.

Ainz made it fall back and took its place at the front.

The Elemental Skull was a caster type undead capable of using magic of the four major elements.

Its HP was about equal to a magic caster of its level, way below that of the Doom Lord. Its offensive capabilities were pretty impressive, that was because every single spell it cast had the maximize metamagic tagged onto it.

In terms of defense, it had immunity to most spell attacks, including Fire, Lightning, Acid, Ice, and other types of elemental attacks. In contrast, it was extremely vulnerable against physical attacks, especially bludgeoning damage.

That was why Ainz had to stand in front of it.

Riku did not raise his guard any further even though a magic caster was now at the frontline. He just kept silent, closed the distance between him and Ainz, and began attacking.

Why are you not the least bit worried about this? Ainz grumbled in his heart as he used the experience he had gained through his training with Albedo to block Riku's slashes.

That said, he could only block one slash out of five, it was basically a one-sided pummel. As Ainz's staff was ignored, the greatsword, spear, and katana began their attacks. Though the hammer was used once too, it was nullified by [Body of Effulgent Beryl]. After three nullifications, Riku appeared to have finally taken the hint. He never used the hammer afterwards.

While Ainz had already known about this, Riku was indeed insanely fast.

Although he was not as fast as the Floor Guardians, he was still relatively fast. Ainz was quite fortunate that Riku had stopped using the hammer. If it were still in use, Ainz would not be able to win at all.

Having borne witness to the Doom Lord's battle, Ainz knew he could not serve

as an adequate vanguard.

Of course, Ainz had the option of using [Perfect Warrior], but the lack of equipment on his person would guarantee him a loss if he did so.

Still, Ainz's struggles at being a vanguard began to see some returns as spells began soaring through the air from his back.

At the same time, Ainz cast the ninth-tier spell, [Vermillion Nova].

The strongest single-target, fire-based spell attack began to scorch Riku, yet his opponent showed no signs of slowing down as the greatsword cleaved towards Ainz again.

Even though his body was wreathed in flame, his swordsmanship remained composed and steady. If he had made his resolve as a warrior, this would not be too surprising, but the complete lack of response from him was suspicious to say the least.

The Elemental Skull cast a ninth-tier spell, [Polar Claw].

A claw that emitted air as chilled as the poles tore into Riku. This was a spell that Ainz had not learnt. It had no secondary effects but could deal a lot of damage, the highest damage-per-second of any ice-based spell in fact.

Ainz memorized the amount of damage Riku took from the two spells.

This was while he was receiving a simultaneous strike from the spear and the katana.

He cast another ninth-tier spell, [Call Greater Thunder].

The Elemental Skull on the other hand, cast a tenth-tier spell, [Mist of Super Acid]. This was also a spell that Ainz had not learnt, that was the reason why he had summoned the Elemental Skull.

Riku was instantly surrounded by a mist of strong acid and so were his weapons.

[Mist of Super Acid] not only damaged an opponent, but also their equipment and weapons, albeit only a small amount of damage to those. Surely the floating armaments around Riku counted as his equipment, right?

Even the weapons around Riku were damaged yet Ainz, who was well within the area of attack, was unscathed. This was because of a special condition applied to the spell.

Riku's HP loss from the acid was notable. Of the four elements, he was damaged the most by acid.

That said, the actual percentage of HP loss was still low.

Through the analysis of every bit of intel he had, Riku must have had defense-

focused job classes. He was probably around level 90.

In any case, the best strategy is to use acid attac— Ahhh! That hurt!

"Nuisance!"

His anger flared up as his thoughts were interrupted, but then a miracle occurred.

He managed to perfectly bat the katana flying towards him away with his staff, causing Ainz's non-existent eyes to widen.

The spear was also blown away as if the knockback effect had activated.

How?!

This staff's knockback effect had all kinds of activation conditions placed upon it.

First of all, blocking a warrior's strike with the staff would not trigger the effect. The effect would not trigger at all if the staff was not used offensively.

If an opponent blocked the attacker's blow with a sword or shield, its effect would not trigger. It would only trigger if one were to land a blow on their opponents' body with it. A sword or shield would obviously not count as an opponent's body. That was why the effect would still trigger if one were to strike an opponent's gauntlet.

So what happened to Riku's katana?

Given the aforementioned conditions, it could be deduced that the floating weapons counted as a part of the wielder's body.

But that would not make much sense.

Sebas had retrieved weapons from the capital in the past.

They were floating weapons used by a dancer.

The weapons were analyzed in detail when they were sent to the Treasury and judged to be simple floating weaponry that obeyed commands to attack in a semi-autonomous way. It should only count as equipment, which meant that if this staff were to strike the dancer's weapon, the knockback effect should not trigger.

If the knockback were to be applied on equipment, only weapons like Female Sensei's Iron Fist of Wrath would be able to pull it off. That was a weapon that had the sole purpose of creating shockwaves when the wielder punched the air. As a weapon that applied knockback to everything, it could also apply knockback on equipment.

But this staff was nowhere near as powerful as that weapon, so why was it able to do such a thing?

From these series of tautologies, he deduced the answer: Riku's weapons counted as a part of his body.

I see...

Ainz had two hypotheses around the mechanics behind this.

First was that Riku's weapons were creatures like Entoma's Blade Bugs. If he were like that Sword Saint Golem, it would make sense why the knockback effect was triggered.

The other hypothesis, the more likely one, was that the weapons were not equipment at all, but were actual parts of Riku's body. This would be a similar situation to how the knockback effect would still apply if the staff's strike was to be met with a Dragon's claw attack.

He had felt that the weapons had HP too, but thought that it was because they counted as Riku's equipment. It was a mistaken assumption based on the fact that they took damage when Riku took damage. It appeared as though those were separate health bars, so—

That moment felt like an eternity to Ainz in his confusion.

What if he used those methods—

But— would that be the correct decision?

No— wrong, that would be a mistake.

Ainz felt the Elemental Skull cast the tenth-tier divine spell, [Seven Trumpeters] and immediately canceled the cast.

He had to reaffirm his role in all of this.

Ainz silently cast a [Message] as Riku retreated as if he was chasing after the knocked back katana. The katana then returned to its original position.

So if the weapons were to be separated from Riku by a certain distance, they could no longer move? Or was his opponent trying to make him think that? Or was he just shocked that it was knocked back?

"...We more or less understand each other's powers. That's good enou—"

Riku slashed towards Ainz as he glided along the ground. He did not intend to speak.

Ainz grumbled deep down at that fact.

It made sense for his opponent to wish to make the most of his time, to answer one's opponent in battle would be a foolish action. So while he respected Riku's commitment to his strategy, he was still annoyed that his opponent was ignoring him.

"Wait! Wait! I haven't finishe—"

Ainz, in the midst of Riku's attacks, threw his staff behind himself. He could see that Riku was slightly confused.

Ainz kneeled down immediately.

"Wait! Please wait! Listen to me!"

The greatsword in Riku's hand stopped on its way to Ainz's head.

Because he was immune to critical strikes, he was not worried about lowering his defenseless head. He gave an order to the Elemental Skull at the same time.

"I did not mean to clash with Your Excellency. This whole thing started because the Kingdom stole the grain that was meant as food aid to the Holy Kingdom. Between them and us, the greater evil should be obvious. What does Your Excellency think? That we were the greater evil?!"

"...You went too far. There had to be better ways to deal with that."

Ainz raised his head.

Riku's greatsword remained suspended, it seemed like he had no intention to strike him at the moment.

"That is because Your Excellency was not the victim! How would Your Excellency have dealt with this?! When the grain that your countrymen toiled to produce was stolen away?!"

"If you did not have the power that you have, things would not have turned out this way. People with power have to be careful about how they use their power and take responsibility for their actions — I, for one, protect the world. Indeed. This world is under my protection."

Upon hearing his opponent's rhetoric, Ainz thought, *this idiot is finally talking.* He was being a silent listener. Some people preferred audience response during their speeches while others did not. From his self-righteous tone Ainz could tell it was best that he kept quiet.

Ainz took mental notes of everything he said.

"The deeds of those who gathered around my loving mother were wrong. They were wrong in the same way that father was. In the end, absolute power corrupts absolutely. It is the source of all faults."

Ainz observed Riku in silence, calming his breath as much as he could.

Riku was being impassioned, Ainz should not be as rude to interrupt him.

To be honest, Ainz could not understand what Riku was talking about at all, but at the same time he did not sound like he was just rambling nonsense. He should have at least spoken in a way that a layman like Ainz could understand.

"Although the root of every wrong could be traced back to us, I will not seek

forgiveness for that. I cannot allow you to continue on your current path of destruction. That is why — Perish."

Whoosh, the greatsword swung down.

Perhaps he felt guilty for executing the defenseless Ainz, the sword was swung at a much slower speed than before.

Hold up, hold up, please reveal some more intel while you're in a good mood, Ainz almost said out loud. His opponent did not intend to speak any more, so there was no need to keep up this boring act.

—The battle continued.

The Elemental Skull, which he had commanded to be on standby, rushed into the greatsword's trajectory and took the hit.

This was an effective use of a summon because the Elemental Skull was no longer of use to him. That was why this was the right choice. If say, this was against Shalltear's Spuit Lance, he would not have done that. However, since Riku's weapon did not have life-steal abilities, he could freely use summons as sacrifices.

"Hiiiiiiii?! So this was all your fault?! Are you not in the wrong then?!"

Ainz let out a pitiful cry. Who were "they"? "What" did they do wrong? Ainz could not understand at all, but if he phrased his response this way, perhaps Riku would expose some more intel. It was worth a try.

Perhaps he really was feeling guilty, his movements were much tardier than before. Ainz capitalized on this opportunity to roll backwards.

The Elemental Skull rushed in between them.

"「—Block him!」"

The Elemental Skull cast its spell while Ainz yelled. Riku ignored the skull and charged for Ainz. The Elemental Skull attempted to stop him, but due to its size and a lack of skills to do so, it failed.

"[Wall of Skeleton]!"

Ainz cast his spell to erect a wall to keep both Riku and the Elemental Skull on the other side.

"How pathetic, Sorcerer King!"

Riku bellowed with anger. Perhaps his fury was because Ainz had left his summon on the other side of the wall so he could escape, but it did not matter to Ainz. If a magic caster was not behind someone but stood alone, it would be no different from suicide. It would be worse than—

He could've easily flown over the wall, but Ainz felt that Riku was attacking

both the Elemental Skull and the wall.

Compared to the Elemental Skull, the [Wall of Skeleton] wasn't too durable. It crumbled immediately at Riku's strike.

The Elemental Skull had cast multiple [Vermillion Nova]s to reduce Riku's HP, but to defeat him would be a tall order. It could be because of his job classes, but his magic resistance was abnormally high.

Given that was the case, Ainz cast a spell on Riku.

"[Temporal Stasis]."

This was a ninth-tier single-target spell. Although the spell could prevent the opponent from moving, it also prevented them from taking any damage while the spell lasted. That was why it was usually used when there were multiple hostiles.

However, Ainz found that his spell was not just resisted, but nullified completely. It appeared that Riku had time-stop countermeasures. Of course, that was not too unusual given how strong he was.

At the same time the greatsword was swung towards Ainz, the hammer was also swung towards the Elemental Skull.

Ainz tanked the greatsword's damage and as a precaution, cast [Greater Break Item] on the other weapons flying towards him. It was not just resisted, but nullified again.

So it was true that the weapons counted as Riku's body.

As the Elemental Skull took a massive amount of damage, Riku looked into the air in panic.

A figure was rapidly descending.

It was Albedo.

"—!"

Ainz heard Riku let out a sound that could not even be defined as a sound. He was absolutely stunned.

As Riku shook, Albedo approached him, her speed was on par with one of Aura's arrows. And then—

"YOU BASTARD, AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!!!!"

While that terrifying roar was heard, the halberd named 3F was swung down with the intention to split Riku's head open. Riku raised his greatsword and spear in a cross to block her attack.

The impact created by 3F was sizable, as both of Riku's feet were sunk into the ground.

In the next moment, Riku was blown away to the side.

Albedo had stomped her foot onto Riku's chest. The armor let out a pitiful clang.

"You insect! How dare you disrespect Ainz-sama! Unforgivable!!"

Albedo's declaration caused the air around them to quake. She began attacking afterwards.

The distance between the two was closed in an instant as Riku received an attack with enough force to send him soaring into orbit.

The sound of metal clashing together rang out at an ear-piercing volume.

Riku used two of the floating weapons to block this attack.

He flew backwards with all of his strength. Not with a jump, he flew back without his feet touching the ground.

"Albedo, stop! That is enough!"

Ainz halted Albedo, who was about to follow up on her attack.

That was enough, he should not allow Albedo to fight any longer.

"—Understood."

While her glance told him that she was unhappy, Albedo still stopped moving.

It was probably correct to assume that he no longer wished to fight, Riku began ascending to pull some distance between them.

Albedo stood silently by Ainz's side, using her own body as a shield against Riku. She was probably on alert for long-range attacks by the enemy.

"Agneía-danna. I will say it again. Become my subordinate! How about it?! I will give you everything you have ever desired!"

His proposal received no reply, yet Ainz continued on.

"How regretful! Still, the doors of the Sorcerer Kingdom are always open to you. You may come to visit anytime you wish!" After he said that, Ainz lowered his voice to say to Albedo, "Do you think he still wants to fight?"

"No — I do not think he wants to anymore. But, if he is not retreating, it might be best for us to defeat him right here. If we both attacked at the same time, it should not be too difficult, right?"

While he should not have heard their conversation, Riku disappeared nonetheless. The barrier he had erected also melted away.

Ainz was not sure if he had teleported before taking down the barrier or vice versa, nor could he tell where he ran off to.

Although there were still things that had to be investigated, Ainz felt as though they had successfully completed their mission.

"...Good grief, that's one less thing to worry about. Good work."

"I am not worthy of such praise. There still might be people surveilling us. It is best for us to return to Nazarick first."

"Ah, let us do that then."

After recalling the Elemental Skull, Ainz cast [Greater Teleportation] to retreat with Albedo.

•

The armored man who went by the name of Riku Agneía used World Teleportation to get to their predetermined meeting spot. He showed up in front of his collaborator, who had already been waiting for him there.

"Sorry I'm late."

"Nah, don't sweat it. I just arrived too," the respondent was none other than the leader of the adamantite-ranked adventurer group Red Drop, Azuth. Because he was wearing his familiar Powered Suit, Riku had to look upwards when speaking to him.

He was not being honest however, Azuth had been waiting there for five minutes already.

And as to the reason why Riku knew this, he had been observing this place from afar for a while now.

The reason for which should be obvious, he was worried that Azuth was serving as bait.

If the Sorcerer King's subordinates were indeed surveilling Azuth, Riku would abandon him immediately to return to his own country. That was why before he had even started checking if they were being watched, he had been keeping an eye out for his surroundings.

That said, therein laid a different kind of danger, one that would require conversing with Azuth to confirm. Which was why Riku had appeared before Azuth.

"Sorry, Tsa. She got away. I think she was headed towards where you were... did you finish the Sorcerer King off?"

"Unfortunately, no. Even though you lent me your power, I truly am sorry."

The one who had called himself Riku Agneía in front of the Sorcerer King, Tsaindorcus Vaision, lowered his head.

Perhaps the other Dragon Lords would say that this was beneath the dignity expected of a long-lived Dragon Lord, one who stood at the top of the world, but Tsa did not care much for that. If him bowing allowed him to curry favor with another party, he would bow any number of times.

"There's no need to apologize. It was my fault that that woman was not delayed for longer. You couldn't defeat him because you didn't have enough time, right?"

Tsa thought long and hard about what kind of response would paint him in the best light and ended up just gently saying to Azuth, "Not at all."

"No, Azuth. While it was unfortunate that the Prime Minister of the Sorcerer Kingdom, Albedo, was not someone that you could handle, you were still able to hold her up for such a long time. That was honestly a great help. I couldn't vanquish the Sorcerer King simply because he was much stronger than I had anticipated."

In truth, that was indeed the case.

During their previous meetings, Azuth had been assigned the mission to draw Albedo away from the barrier. If he were being honest, he thought that it wouldn't be too surprising if Azuth was slain by Albedo, but had he said this out loud, it was easy for him to imagine that Azuth would no longer offer his help. For that reason, he had not explained the full details of the plan to him.

Given the above, it was truly impressive how Azuth managed to survive a scuffle with Albedo.

To Tsa, his most important duty was to stay vigilant of Players who held malicious intent towards this world, which was why he did not want to just blindly expend his strength.

Still, he had a question in mind, or rather something he could not figure out.

That was of course, why Azuth had survived. The Powered Suit he wore could indeed raise the wearer's offensive and defensive capabilities while also providing the user with a variety of abilities. It did not, however, raise the wearer's HP or MP at all. It was like a sturdy chitin exoskeleton covering an insect's soft innards.

While his combat interactions with Albedo were short, he still understood one thing — she was much stronger than the Sorcerer King.

That was probably because the Sorcerer King was more adept at handling large armies, so he might not have been able to fight at his full potential in a one-on-one.

In any case, Azuth was definitely not strong enough to survive a fight with Albedo with any ease.

So, how exactly did Azuth survive?

"That demon, Albedo, is there any way we could take her out?"

"No, it's near impossible. I had to use the full arsenal of the suit and created as much distance between us as possible to barely even hang on to dear life."

So that was how it was.

Indeed, Albedo did not use any ranged attacks, nor did she appear to have any ranged weapons.

Everything made sense then. His previous speculations seemed a bit malicious in hindsight.

Tsa felt ashamed of his own thoughts. He had suspected that Azuth had made a deal with Albedo, or perhaps with the Sorcerer King himself, to betray him. With that said, all was fair play in terms of hypotheticals. At the end of the day, Azuth was just a collaborator and not a companion. Moreover, he had no concrete evidence to support the notion that Azuth had not betrayed him.

"Ah, right. I told the Sorcerer King that my name was Riku Agneía, do keep a note of that. If the Sorcerer King were to ask about me, remember to refer to me with this fake name."

"Riku Agneía? Does that name signify anything?"

"Not at all, just a random name I came up with. But, if someone in the world does have that name, today's events will probably cause them a lot of trouble."

That was only a half-truth.

Indeed, he had not heard of Agneía being used as a surname before, but the name Riku was a real one.

"It would rouse the Sorcerer King's anger towards them, which wouldn't be a minor issue."

"Indeed. Don't forget about the anger of the Prime Minister of the Sorcerer Kingdom, Albedo too."

The two laughed softly.

Of course, if someone named Riku Agneía really existed in this world, this would not be something to scoff at, for that guy at least.

Tsa laughed as he recalled.

The demon named Albedo.

The Sorcerer King was not able to break through the barrier, so he was not that much of a threat. That demon however, was able to pass through the Wild

Magic spell, World Isolating Barrier.

This mid-tier Wild Magic spell could create a space that was separate from reality. It prevented entry through all conventional means as well as any attempts to teleport out of it. To be able to enter the barrier meant that Albedo was either a Wild Magic user or possessed a World Class Item.

While he had not confirmed if that demon was a Player or NPC, from the master-servant relation between the two, it was most likely the latter. But if that were the case, why would Ainz not equip the World Class Item himself, but give it to Albedo instead? That was a mystery.

Unless Albedo is the Player and the Sorcerer King is the NPC?

This would not be too ridiculous of an idea. To rank second in this world's hierarchy was probably a safer choice.

Perhaps the Sorcerer King had a World Class Item too? But since he could not break out of the barrier, the likelihood would be low, right? Or maybe he left his World Class Item behind?

That was certainly possible. He had heard from Riku that there were guilds which possessed two World Class Items, so it was possible that *they* had two as well.

"Tsa, how strong was the Sorcerer King? If he was someone that not even you could defeat, I feel like he would be really strong. If it were me, no, if it were *this,* could it win?"

"Azuth, no offense, but no. He's an opponent that not even I could defeat easily."

"Is that so..."

"But thanks to your assistance, I have a general idea of his baseline capabilities now. Of course, if I were to face the Sorcerer King one-on-one again, I should be able to triumph."

He had said that much, but if he relied on this armor, victory would be hard-fought. Perhaps he should make preparations on where they would fight.

But... Tsaindorcus sighed.

If he was of a similar level to the vampire from last time, this armor would probably struggle in serious combat. However, if he were to not use the armor but face the Sorcerer King in person, he could not lose. That would be true even if he was as strong as the vampire. As long as he fought using his real body, there would be no issues at all.

Still, if he gave them too much time to expand their influence, things would

get out of hand.

"As expected of you, the strongest Dragon Lord in the world."

"I don't think so myself. There are many out there who are stronger than I am. Hmmm... I can win against the Sorcerer King because I happen to counter him."

Tsa's abilities were more effective against the undead. He had also confirmed in the battle just then that his abilities did work on the Sorcerer King. That was why Tsa had judged the Sorcerer King to be an opponent that did not warrant too much caution.

Compared to the Sorcerer King, the demon named Albedo was much more dangerous.

"Pardon me, Azuth, should another situation like this arise, would you still be willing to assist me?"

"Next time...? Hmm."

Azuth solemnly muttered a single phrase. Tsa understood the meaning behind his words and so did not question him any further.

After some time had passed, Azuth finally spoke.

"Will the Kingdom perish?"

"...It probably will. There is not much I could do to help even if I wanted to."

"Is that so... So next time I'll also have to buy time with that demoness? I could, but you do know that there's a chance that I won't be able to buy any time at all the next time around, right?"

"Indeed, they might not split up next time. That is why, if that demoness left the Sorcerer King's side for any reason at all, would you be willing to fight the Sorcerer King alongside me?"

If Azuth handled the summons, Tsa could definitely defeat the Sorcerer King.

He had not been assaulted by the Sorcerer King's subordinates during their little conversation here. There was nothing left for him to do here. Tsa shifted his gaze towards the capital far, far away.

Tsa had already witnessed the fall of many nations. This one will soon be facing its own destruction. Tsa felt somewhat lonesome, but compared to that, he was more anxious of the fact that these lands would soon fall under the Sorcerer Kingdom's rule.

Although he had not received any grace from this Kingdom, he will still miss it dearly.

While he had already notified his companions, perhaps there was also a need

to call upon the other Dragon Lords too.

"...Almost forgot, I met with the people from the Theocracy and mentioned the name you told me."

"Really? Now they'll know that you have someone backing you up."

If that was the case, Azuth's safety was more or less guaranteed.

Azuth himself held no value at all, but the Powered Suit in his possession was an item of great importance, important enough that the Theocracy might plot against him for it. For that reason, he had to make them think that Azuth had protection to fall back on so that they would not make any moves against him. This also strengthened the relationship he had with Azuth. It was a move that had nothing but upsides.

"I have a question, why not tell them that I heard it from you directly?"

"Simple, if they had no clue on where the information source was, they would try to investigate it. There is a chance that it could cause some friction among the upper echelons of the Theocracy."

Other than that, there was another reason.

Should an emergency arise, he could kill off Azuth without leaving any loose ends.

"This is no place to talk, let us head back. Your companions must be waiting for you, correct?"

"Yes, they're waiting for me. I'll leave it to you then, Tsa."

Just as Tsa was about to cast World Teleportation, he thought about Azuth.

It was only for a single reason, the question of whether it was still beneficial to assist him or not.

Sure, Azuth's Powered Suit was highly valuable, but without it he was nothing. To put it bluntly, if the Powered Suit were in more capable hands, they would surely be able to utilize it to its full potential.

Plus, Tsa had no confidence that he could reign him in.

Azuth as he stood, was more of an aid to Tsa than a companion.

If he were to go off script like last time, it would most likely lead to catastrophic losses.

Indeed, Tsa was in the wrong that time too.

To give unto Azuth the appropriate level of alertness against the Sorcerer King's invasion, he had discussed the likely outcomes of the invasion with him in detail.

Azuth had requested Tsa's aid in defeating the Sorcerer King to save the

Kingdom. He should have predicted back then that he would use the Powered Suit to rescue that city.

If he had not taken independent action back then, surely Tsa would have been able to defeat the Sorcerer King during his siege of the capital.

—Should he just kill Azuth and take the Powered Suit?

This was not too bad of an idea to Tsa. If he gave the Powered Suit to someone who was powerful enough to bend it to their will, it would definitely be more useful than letting Azuth keep it. He could also gain a stronger card for his hand then.

Personally, Tsa felt no disdain for Azuth, nor did he want to kill him himself; but of what worth were emotions in this world?

—*Riku...*

What was I reminiscing for, now that things have turned out that way? Tsa laughed at himself internally. These two hands of his were already besmirched with filth. It was better to do it now than later.

Plus, he could blame it on the Sorcerer King if he did it now.

Azuth fought until he lost consciousness with Albedo and later handed the Powered Suit to Tsa. That would be a good cover story.

But — should he really allow history to repeat itself again?

"Oy, what's wrong, Tsa?"

"Huh?"

Tsa finally noticed that he had been deep in his own thoughts.

"What's wrong? Did you notice something suspicious?"

"...Nothing. Azuth, let us go back."

He should put those thoughts aside. Resurrection magic was a thing, death could not guarantee one's silence. If he returned with just the Powered Suit but not Azuth's body, it would rouse suspicion. If one were to act purely on utilitarian principles, it would lead to negative consequences more often than not.

Just so he would have no regrets, it was best for him to return and give it greater consideration before making his judgment on whether or not he should give up on Red Drop.

Tsa prayed that his actions on this day would not lead to fatal errors in the future as he cast World Teleportation.

The night winds blew through unoccupied space.

•

Ainz returned to Nazarick with [Gate] and took the ring from the usual place. He used its power to advance towards the Ninth Floor with Albedo.

After some time traveling by foot, they reached the room that was their destination.

"Albedo, do you want to head inside first?"

"No, it is fine. You contributed more this time around so you should be the one to enter first."

Ainz thanked her and opened the giant doors.

He walked to the center of the room, in front of the throne, and took a knee as he bowed. He could feel that Albedo, who was behind him, was making the same movements.

"Good work, Pandora's Actor and Albedo."

"We are not worthy of your praise."

Upon raising his head, he saw his master nodding regally. On his sides were Shalltear and Demiurge, who was holding a Mirror of Remote Viewing.

He must have observed the entirety of his battle with Riku through that item.

Pandora's Actor undid his transformation.

"While we wanted to return the magic items that we had borrowed from Ainz-sama, we found it to be disrespectful to make Ainz-sama wait any longer. Do forgive us for still wearing Ainz-sama's equipment."

He meant the equipment that he was currently wearing, lower-tier backup items that they had been lent from their master. He was intensely apologetic for still having those items equipped.

"Haha. Pandora's Actor, pay it no mind. It would have been fine for you to do as you wished. This was not such a big deal after all. What was important was your opponent — now then, while we have seen the battle, I still wish to hear from the combatant himself. How was it?"

"Yes. I believe that he is a tank whose level was around 90. That was because magic was generally ineffective against him, which was why I had judged him to be of that level."

"I see. A strong foe. Hmmm... huh? What's wrong, Albedo? Do you have another opinion?"

“Yes, my opinion differs from Pandora’s Actor’s. I do not believe him to be that strong. Of course, I only landed two strikes on him, so I could not make as accurate of a judgment, but he felt like a tank of around... level 80 or so.”

Given that they were sure that he was a tank, then Albedo’s opinion as a tank should be much more accurate than his own.

“I see. Although I was of the opinion that Pandora’s Actor, who was locked in combat with him for longer, would be able to make the more accurate judgment, Shalltear who had been observing the battle alongside me had estimated a similar range to Albedo’s. Around level 85 or so. Given that, it appears that there is a need to call Cocytus and Sebas over.”

While Shalltear’s combat prowess was high, her build was not focused on pure physical damage output. It was unfortunate that Sebas was on standby in E-Rantel and Cocytus was overseeing the siege of the capital so they could not be summoned over at the current moment.

“If the two, no, if we combined all three of your estimates... So, are the three of you in agreement that the opponent was a tank that specialized in magic resistance?”

The three fell into deep contemplation.

“...Shalltear, why do you seem troubled? If something is wrong, do speak your mind.”

“I may have just gotten the wrong impression ~arinsu...”

“That is fine too. After all, this entire operation was to expose this foe’s abilities and thus have been meticulously planned from the outset. As long as we could gain some sort of insight on our opponent, do feel free to speak your mind.”

“If that is the case. Ainz-sama, because I can also summon Doom Lords, perhaps Ainz-sama had already noticed ~arinsu. It felt like its combat abilities were weakened significantly, was it because Pandora’s Actor was the summoner ~arinsu?”

“That would not be the case. While Pandora’s Actor’s transformations are weaker than the original, his summons should not be any weaker. In addition, he had been instructed to not use any special abilities of mine to strengthen the summons... In any case, shall we both summon Doom Lords for you all to observe after this? Perhaps you could figure out what had been bothering you.”

“Understood!”

“Now then, Pandora’s Actor, you spoke with him, correct? What did you talk

about, what attitude did he adopt, and what emotions could you feel from him? Do tell us in detail. After all, this mirror cannot transmit sound."

"Understood!"

Pandora's Actor began re-enacting his conversations with Riku. Their conversations weren't long, so it was pretty easy to act out. He even injected some of his own interpretations mid-dialogue: the emotions he felt through Riku's tone and the respective explanations.

Midway through, Pandora's Actor sensed from behind him, an unpleasant aura emitted by Albedo. She spoke with an annoyed tone.

"Even if you wanted our opponent to lower his guard, to kneel as the Sorcerer King, and by extension as the Absolute Overlord of the Great Underground Tomb of Nazarick, Ainz-sama, is just out of line."

Indeed, he had felt that he had gone overboard. If his master were there instead, he would have never done that. *I must pay for my transgressions,* he thought as he raised his head to see that his master was nodding along in a gratified manner.

He must be agreeing with Albedo's opinion.

But just as Pandora's Actor was about to lower his head, his master's voice reached his ears.

"No, that was executed beautifully."

While he sounded somewhat sarcastic, his master did appear to be in a good mood. Pandora's Actor could not tell which side he was on and thus missed his opportunity to bow.

"That kneel was great. If merely kneeling could cause an opponent to falter, I would kneel any number of times. We lost nothing through that kneel yet it made the opponent think that we were nothing to be on guard for. Hehe... He should not have noticed that he had been duped yet."

—How awe-inspiring.

Though he already had an idea of the extent of his creator's drive for victory, chills were still sent down Pandora's Actor's back.

Even against an opponent that could be easily defeated should he be serious, he would still not deign himself too mighty to do such a thing in order to invoke a false sense of security in them.

Could any king, nay — could any overlord really care not for their own reputation to scheme at this level?

Could any being who was only served upon but had never served, resolutely

kneel in front of their enemy?

No such being existed, other than his master, the one seated in front of him.

They must have had the same thought, the other guardians in the chamber had expressions that told of the awe invoked within them.

Among them, Demiurge was the one to ask.

"Would it not rouse more suspicion in our opponent if one as great as Ainz-sama knelt down in those circumstances? He must have judged that Ainz-sama was someone who was capable of deducing the best move for every situation."

"No, surely no one's thought process would lead them to that conclusion normally, correct? 'He's not so impressive after all' or 'so that's what you were really like' was probably what was going through his mind, correct? If the situation were flipped... If I were in his shoes, I would probably be as careless as he was, right? No, I would probably kill him right away. What would you do, Albedo?"

"If they were just a regular civilian, I would kill them immediately, but if they were a king I might capture them for intel. Would I get careless... maybe."

"Is that so...? Shalltear, what about you?"

"I would mull it over ~arinsu."

"...Mmmm. Perhaps it would not have an effect at all... It would be best if kneeling was not necessary. It would not be the best situation if you could not dodge the enemy's attacks. Now then — let us change the topic. About that barrier."

Pandora's Actor could not figure out what that barrier was at all. He had thought that it blocked physical and magical access in and out of it, but Albedo could enter unhindered. So, was the mystery solved?

"The two of you might have figured it out already, but I do believe that it was because of World Class Items. Pandora's Actor, from what you have said, you were not too sure were you?"

Pandora's Actor's eyes widened.

Indeed, if that was the case, everything made sense. Albedo had a World Class Item on her person back then and he did not. But—

"How did Ainz-sama figure it out?"

"A logical line of questioning... I was using the mirror to observe Pandora's Actor and Riku's battle. Even after that barrier was erected, the mirror was not affected at all. At first I thought that it was just something cosmetic to scare us..." Ainz's gaze fell on Pandora's Actor, "but it did have effects. I switched my

train of thought and began investigating the differences between us — more accurately, the differences between me, the user of the mirror, and Pandora's Actor.

Ainz touched the World Class Item in his abdomen.

"After I took this off, I could no longer see anything through the mirror. Equipping it allowed me to see the scene again. It is highly likely that Riku has an ability that is similar to Aura's World Class Item."

"...Please wait, Ainz-sama. Riku did mutter the phrase 'World Isolating Barrier' and it did expend his HP. So was it not a special skill that only higher-level beings like Ainz-sama could obtain? Like Ainz-sama's trump card?"

"It would be impossible to accomplish what he did through the same system our powers came from. Rather, is it not more likely that he used that term as a bluff? The expenditure of HP could be an activation condition for a World Class Item. Problem is, I have never heard of such a World Class Item. While many do have activation costs, merely reducing one's HP would almost be... cute."

"Was his HP constantly drained?"

Pandora's Actor shook his head at Albedo's question.

"It fell only after he activated it. The barrier did not appear to be continuously draining him to maintain itself."

"Exactly. Did you not say that his other abilities also drained his health? Indeed, there are World Class Items with multiple abilities, for example, this one." His master touched his orb, "But, the rules his abilities were playing by were just too different from ours."

The abilities he used were probably weapon enhancement, armor enhancement, teleportation, and barrier.

"...I talked about ability systems before because if his powers were unique to this world, then everything would be explained. Assuming the worst-case scenario, it is some unusual ability that could rival World Class Items. If that is the case, we cannot even be sure if what brainwashed Shalltear was a World Class Item or not. We would have to re-evaluate that. How annoying!"

"Ainz-sama, as it stands, we do not have enough information."

"Exactly, Demiurge... perhaps there is a need to lose to Riku again."

The two guardians next to the throne had displeased expressions on their faces, it was easy to imagine that the Albedo behind him must have been the same.

Even if it was intentional, nobody present would feel happy that their master

was to lose.

"Wipe those expressions off of your faces. I am not losing because I desire to lose, but because it is a necessity to understand our opponent's deck. That is how we guarantee victory, it cannot be helped. If this were a simple training exercise, losing would not mean death, neither would we have to put up such an act. However, this is actual combat."

Everybody, including Pandora's Actor, were quietly listening to their master's every word.

"We have already confirmed that you all and the inhabitants of this world could be resurrected — but what about me? While we do not have solid proof of this, the Six Great Gods and Eight Greed Kings of yore were probably beings similar to what I am. Their legends concluded with their deaths, so it is likely that they could not be resurrected. We have no choice but to assume that to be the truth when carrying out these operations. To put it simply, in order to avoid my death, the worst form of defeat, we have no option but to accept other forms of defeat."

"—Ainz-sama."

"What's wrong, Albedo?"

"Ainz-sama, what you have just said made a lot of sense. So would it not be better for you to stay within the Great Underground Tomb of Nazarick, rather than leave for excursions?"

A perfectly logical conclusion. If there was a possibility that their master could not be revived, then having him stay where it was safest for him and not step out of that place would be best.

"...Indeed. I have thought of that too, but surely you could understand it too. Especially you all?"

His brain went into overdrive in an attempt to understand what his master was talking about, but nothing came to mind.

Ooooh, how depressing was that?

As one of the foremost intellectuals in Nazarick, he still could not immediately grasp his master's thoughts.

Pandora's Actor racked his brain until a strange liquid almost began to seep out of it. It was the same for Demiurge and Albedo, one could see it on their faces. Shalltear, on the other hand, looked like she was not thinking at all.

Do not think about the others. Pandora's Actor forced his attention away from them.

Silence fell upon the group for quite a while, only to be broken by their master's disappointed sigh.

Pandora's Actor felt unbearable shame and so did Demiurge. While he could not see Albedo, who was behind him, she was surely the same.

"What's wrong? Raise your heads."

He spoke with such a harsh tone, yet Pandora's Actor could not allow himself to disobey a direct order from his master.

He raised his head.

"...Mmmm, let us move onto the next topic. Who is that person? What connections to platinum could you think of?"

Albedo spoke first.

"...One of the possibilities is just as Pandora's Actor had said, that our opponent was one of the Thirteen Heroes."

His master nodded in agreement.

"The other possibility is that he is one of the councilors of the Council State, Platinum Dragon Lord. Those are the only beings I could think of with a connection to platinum."

"Given that, let me ask a question. Was he trying to fool us into believing that he was the Platinum Dragon Lord or one of the Thirteen Heroes so that we would go against them or not? The answer might also lie in between those two extremes. So, what do you believe is the correct answer?"

"I am terribly sorry, Ainz-sama. As we do not have enough information to work off of, it is difficult to conclusively judge which is the correct answer."

Demiurge answered so.

Pandora's Actor concurred, but since his master had asked, "What do you believe was the correct answer?" the correct response should have been one of the options. That was probably why he had prefaced his answer with an apology.

"Are there any other opinions...? There appears to be none. I too, agree with Demiurge's opinion that we do not have enough intel. After we are done with the Kingdom, do gather the opinions of the other Floor Guardians on this matter. Perhaps one of them could notice a detail that we had missed. In any case, we are still proceeding with our plan to send envoys to the Council State. While they greet the heads of state, have them sarcastically scoff at this Platinum Dragon Lord fellow a few times — That should be fine, right? Albedo."

"Understood. How shall I deal with the contents of the missive?"

"I will leave that up to you."

“Understood.”

“That should about conclude this meeting, correct? I should return to the capital soon. Pandora’s Actor, though it might be embarrassing, I must ask you to stri—”

An “—Ahh” sound could be heard. His master turned his head around to the guardian who had made that sound.

“What’s wrong, Shalltear? Did you forget something?”

“Yes, Ainz-sama. I do have a question ~arinsu. Were you really planning to recruit that Riku person as a subordinate ~arinsu?”

“Ahhh, about that. Of course not. If he really came under my wing, I would gather all the information I need — the organization he served, its purpose, et cetera — and he would be killed afterwards.”

“Would it not be a waste to kill him?”

He could sense that his master had a wry smile on him upon hearing Albedo’s question.

“I am not confident in my abilities to reign him in. If you are asking if we could exploit those unusual abilities of his or his World Class Item, whichever was the case... Albedo, would you be confident enough to do that? If you are, I will leave it all up to you...”

“It would be difficult to do so before we have collected enough detailed intel. But if it turned out that it was indeed possible for us to do so, there are many places where he could be of use to us.”

“Mmmm.”

His master’s gaze lingered on Albedo.

He was probably contemplating about Albedo’s abilities and Riku. If his creator was one to even include what could happen a millennium down the line into his grand scheme, he was probably analyzing how Riku could factor into his plans.

The destruction of the Kingdom must be part of those plans as well.

He must have had ulterior motives beyond demonstrating to the world the difference in treatment received by the Kingdom and the Empire due to their actions, that had to be why he would go back on his words in order to invade the Kingdom. This was a common opinion shared by Pandora’s Actor, Albedo, and Demiurge.

One would not have to think too hard to connect the undead creation experiments to this.

After all, he was his creator. This was undoubtedly a premonition of something greater to come, something not even he could fathom.

His creator, a Supreme Being whose intellect held such depths, how awesome was he? To be honest, Pandora's Actor felt sorry for the others. It pained him how he had to restrain himself from boasting of his dear creator.

"I see. Indeed, he would be of no use to us dead. I will hear Demiurge's opinion on this too and depending on the situation, Albedo will be placed in charge of this. Of course, that is assuming that Riku would be willing to serve under me. If he is not willing, killing him is permissible."

It was impossible for anyone to object to that. If their master willed it so, it must be correct.

"Good. Now... other opinions... appears to be none. It is about time for me to return to the capital. I still have to close the curtains on that show."

"...Such petty theatrics would not require Ainz-sama to personally participate, correct? I believe that I can handle it on my own..."

"No, Albedo. Pay it no mind, I will go. Hehe, though I may not be on the same level as Ulbert-san and the rest, I still have my own standards to enforce against forms of resistance."

"...I see, was that why?"

Albedo replied in a manner that implied that she had seen through the hidden meaning behind his words, prompting his master to glance at her. He must have been checking how much of his words she understood.

After some time had passed, his master seemed satisfied as he declared in a manner expected of an esteemed ruler.

"...Exactly, Albedo. It is exactly as you have surmised."

2

Climb, Renner, and Brain were informed by the few remaining knights that there were guests expecting them after they had returned to the palace.

"Blue Rose" had requested an audience.

Under normal circumstances, they would have been brought to this room immediately, but the trio's current outfits were hardly appropriate. Especially Renner, whose clothes said handmaiden more than princess. They were absolutely soaked with sweat. The knights were instructed to bring them in after an hour to give the three enough time to fix their appearances.

The Sorcerer Kingdom's army was in formation outside of the capital and could attack at any time. For the capital and the castle's defense, knights were being moved back and forth. That was why they had to take care of the menial tasks, because none of the maids were there.

Most of the maids who attended to the palace were the daughters of noblemen. They had run away from the palace to their family's mansion. Whether that was the safer option remained to be seen.

He had heard from his master, Renner, that the atrocities the Sorcerer Kingdom's army had committed along their way towards the capital will most likely be committed here too. That was a logical deduction. Nowhere within the capital was safe now.

So what could one do to guarantee their safety? Renner had responded to this question with the gambit of leaving the capital.

Because of that, Climb and Brain had discussed in secret about arranging a carriage outside of the palace. If Renner decided to run away, it could prove useful.

Of course, he knew that Renner did not intend to run at all, yet he could not

definitely say that she would not change her mind. This was just a plan in case she does.

Climb prepared water and a towel for Renner to wipe away her sweat. Normally he would have prepared a bath for her, but they only had an hour so that was off the table.

Since the maids were not there, Climb had no choice but to help groom Renner. The duty to prepare tea then fell on Brain. The scene of the swordsman flipping through cabinets trying to find tea was honestly hilarious even though he felt sorry for him.

After Renner had wiped off her sweat and applied perfume to herself, while she picked out her gown, the two men took a shower.

Unlike women — unlike the Princess — the two men readied themselves through much simpler processes.

They undressed, let water take its course down from the top of their heads, and wiped themselves off. A secondary rinse later and they were all done. Sure, they had to change into clean clothing too, but the entire process took no longer than ten minutes for the two.

An hour that felt shorter than it should have passed by and the three were ready. Renner seemed to have picked up on some unpleasant smells as she sniffed her hair and wrist. Climb could not smell the scent of sweat, but he could faintly smell the scent of the oil and smoke that had been infused into her hair when she cooked. It should not have been as noticeable after it mixed with the scent of her perfume.

The knights not only led Lakyus in.

The entirety of Blue Rose was present. Lakyus was the only one in a gown, the rest of them were in combat gear. It looked like they were the bodyguards of a noblewoman.

Climb was a little shocked.

Indeed, Lakyus did not come over by herself normally, but it was rare to see all of them together. This might have been the first time they came all together.

“You have taken time out of what little you had, yet I still made you wait. I am terribly sorry for that.”

“No, it is fine. I did not inform you of my arrival earlier so this was an impromptu visit. I should be the one to thank you for taking the time to meet us— ah, there is no need for tea. We do not have that much time, after all.”

Just as Renner was about to steep the tea that Brain had procured, Lakyus

stopped her.

"Oy, Lakyus. I feel like we should have enough time to drink a cup of tea, right?"

The one who spoke was Evileye. The rest of Blue Rose nodded along in agreement, causing a shocked expression to surface on Lakyus' face.

"Everybody... wants to drink tea?"

Evileye sighed heavily on purpose.

"The Princess has been so gracious to welcome guests who had barged in without warning with tea, would our leader be so cruel as to refuse her offer? What an indifferent fellow. Oy, musclehead."

She received no response from Gagaran. Although the gazes of everybody in the room were affixed on Gagaran, she pretended that she had heard and seen nothing at all.

"Oy, you there with the coy expression, woman who'd sink straight to the bottom if she fell into the sea."

She was indeed being completely ignored. Evileye sighed loudly in response to her behavior.

"Oy, Gagaran."

"Oy? Oh? What? What do you need me for? What's going on, Evileye?"

"...You want to drink something too, right?"

"Ahhh, yes. I feel like gulping down a large amount of liquid. I could probably drink ten liters if I had to."

"What even... Do you know how much time you've wasted just to hear me say that... Mmmm, whatever. Regardless of how much there is, boss, can we get some too?"

"Haaaah, of course it's fine... are you drinking too, Evileye?"

Lakyus' eyes widened as she spoke. Indeed, if Evileye were to drink too, Climb would be as surprised as she was. To drink the tea, she would have to take off her mask but as far as Climb knew, this magic caster did not take off her mask under any circumstances.

Evileye did not reply to her question, but only shrugged as if to say no.

"Well then, we shall steep the tea while the boss and Princess talk. I guarantee the tea will be richer than you could dream of."

"Eh? You have already poured it into a Warm Bottle, huh?"

Lakyus said with a shocked expression as Tia nodded.

"We might not have enough considering the amount of people here. We'll

see."

Tia began pouring the tea, but her movements were so unrefined that most of the tea split onto the saucer. This country's tea culture did not dictate that tea should be drunk from the saucer, which was why Lakyus was furrowing her brows. Just as she had said, the Warm Bottle did not hold nearly enough liquid for the eight occupants of this room.

"No need for me, right?"

"Ah, same here."

Climb refused a cup after Brain did so too. That did not mean that they had enough tea for the rest of them. Even when those two were factored out, the amount of tea they had was still inadequate for six people.

"We rarely get to drink this... You guys are seriously being ungrateful."

Could you really consider the offering of tea to be an act of good grace? Something just did not sit right with that definition.

After pouring five servings of tea, Tia swung the Warm Bottle around as if to emphasize the fact that it was empty.

"Ah — it's empty — what a shame — we don't have nearly enough, especially with this 10-liter drinking gal around—" Tia flashed a glance at Tina, "wouldn't rumors spread that the Third Princess doesn't even have enough tea to adequately serve her guests?—"

Lakyus rubbed her glabella as Renner laughed, "Ufufu."

"Now that is troubling. Although, in times like these, it is probably unwise to maintain the image of a lavish lifestyle. But I do think there is a need to demonstrate that the royal family still has a future. So, should I steep more tea?"

"Give it a rest, Renner."

"Lakyus. There's a limit to how much you could remain beholden to everyone's goodwill you know?"

"Eh?"

Lakyus was incredulous as Renner gave a wry smile.

"Should I spell it out for her? Miss Evileye."

"Mmmm. Looks like she's starting to understand... please do educate our hard-headed leader."

"Very well then... The final moments will be upon us soon after all. Everybody is just trying to buy as much time for the both of us as possible."

"...Ahhh, so that's why."

Climb finally understood now that she had put it that way.

Normally, adventurers could not participate in wars, this was a measure put in place to prevent higher casualty counts than normal.

However, since the enemy this time around was the undead and had committed massacres on a massive scale, the Adventurer's Guild of the Kingdom had accepted the royal request to classify this war as an acceptable quest. Just as the case was during Jaldabaoth's demonic disturbance, the guild had approved the mobilization of its members.

The exact details of how they would operate was entirely left up to the adventurers' discretion.

Some had even chosen to join the ranks of the army that was sent out nearly a week ago, from which none had returned. A few of the other teams had chosen to make their last stand inside of the capital.

There were some high-tier teams that had gone missing in the midst of this, perhaps they had accepted the invitation of the Theocracy or had snuck out and fled from the capital of their own volition.

Lakyus and her team, Blue Rose, were one of the teams that had decided to make their last stand at the capital.

They had just received intel that the Sorcerer King's army had set up camp near the capital, Lakyus and the rest of them should not be squandering away what precious time they had left.

Yet still, Lakyus consciously found time to meet with her friend, Renner. Considering that it was extremely likely— no, they were 100% certain that this was the last time she could meet with Renner.

The truth was, she had already prepared tea for five. Servings for Evileye, Gagaran, Tia, Tina, and of course, the one being handed to Climb. Yet, it seemed that none of them was planning to drink it.

If they had told Lakyus outright that she should allocate time to bid her farewells with her friend, she would have definitely rejected that notion based on her personality alone. If they phrased it as her having a cup of tea with her buddies however, she would probably be much more receptive to the idea. Her companions were just being considerate.

"...So, Brain Unglaus. I want to make tea for the remaining few, who must be terribly parched at this point. Show me the way to where the water is boiled."

"Oh. It's this way."

That was probably why. Tina and Tia managed to get the better bodyguard of the two out of the room.

"Should I leave too?"

"Hmmm? Oh, don't mind it. That wasn't why they led him away."

Climb asked Evileye only to receive an answer in the negative.

Eh? Climb was a bit confused. So they were not trying to grant Renner and Lakyus more privacy by getting everyone else out of the room?

Gagaran and Evileye did not seem to want to leave at all. Did she really only want him to lead her to where the water was boiled then?

"Since everybody has insisted, let us chat a little before the tea is ready. Ah! Before that, I have a question. Where were you just then? If you were busy preparing for what is to come, then I will just leave."

"Do you know of the orphanage that I established? I had just returned from cooking there."

"Huh? Cooking? At times like these?"

Lakyus vocally expressed her shock. Climb was surprised too when Renner had asked him to prepare the carriage so that she could go cook for those children.

However, upon arriving at the location and seeing the state of the place, Climb knew that she had made the right decision.

"Yes. The Sorcerer King's army had surrounded the capital for a few days now, plus the army that was sent out a few days back had also used up a sizable amount of food. Our rations have only been dwindling down day by day. That was why I took some of the food stored here to cook a meal for them."

The orphanage did not have much food left. Moreover, the price of food has risen due to the worsening situation in the capital, so the orphanage could no longer sustain its own operations. It had no choice but to decrease the number of meals per day as well as the amount of food the children received per meal. That was why she chose to cook for them, since she was already there to secretly supply them with food anyways and plus it was a rare opportunity for her too.

Renner's mutters began to flash through Climb's mind.

Renner, as she cooked for the children with her well-learned culinary skills, had said, "I wanted to distribute grain to everybody, but we don't have much left. I'm such a hypocrite."

Faced with the Sorcerer Kingdom's army which had already defeated the Kingdom's 400,000 men strong army, they had no hope to stand against them. The capital was fated to fall and so was the royalty.

Yet, no matter how hard he tried to convince the gentle Renner to run away,

she would not budge at all.

Stuck between his loyalty and his own feelings, Climb felt a suffocating pain in his heart. However, he could not allow the two in front of him to sense that under any circumstances.

Climb forcefully suppressed the pain that felt like it could tear him apart.

"You might be the only royal in history to know how to cook."

"I do not think so. There must have been others, just not recorded in the history books was all... Those children must be enjoying their meals right now, it was worth it."

Originally, Renner's cooking was meant to be everybody's lunch but in order to prevent the children from fighting over the food or the employees choosing to go without for them, she had even cooked side dishes to go along with the entree. Everybody there must be satiating themselves right now.

She had cooked so much that dinner should have also been taken care of for them.

Speaking of which, Renner, who could not even peel a potato before, had seamlessly improved her cooking abilities by quite a margin. The thinness of peelings she could achieve nowadays was honestly amazing.

This woman, who glistened in radiant light in his eyes, appeared to be naturally talented for the culinary arts.

Renner seemed to have noticed Climb's reverent gaze and smiled in response.

It was such a warm and welcoming smile.

Those two's conversation was filled with optimistic topics, perhaps they were subconsciously avoiding the discussion of their inevitable fate. Or rather, was it precisely because they knew what fate awaited them that they avoided talking about it?

Not long later, Tia returned alone with the Warm Bottle.

"Where's Mr. Unglaus and Tina?"

"Hmmm? Those two went looking for desserts to pair with the tea, so I came back first."

"Desserts?" Lakyus half-squinted at Tia, "That would have been appropriate if we were the one to bring some along—"

"—I do not mind so it is fine. I should have baked plenty of pastries back then to serve as backup food. Since I added a lot of sugar in them, they could be used as desserts."

"...See? Even the Princess agrees. Oni... crOni[18] boss is just being extra. Also, this is the first time I have tried steeping tea."

The tea that flowed out of the Warm Bottle was excessively thick.

"Hey. Oni boss. It feels nice to down it in one gulp. It's got a clean texture."

"Thank you."

"The taste is honestly excellent, I suppose Your Highness the Princess would not need my recommendation. Please have my share too, it cooled down already."

Tia placed her filled cup of tea in front of Renner.

Such a breach of etiquette angered Lakyus somewhat, but Tina kept silent anyways. Climb felt that he should also keep his mouth shut.

Lakyus picked up her cup and breathed in the fragran— smell. Her expression became twisted.

"The taste was too strong..."

"Don't mind it."

"...Of course I would mind. This is the first time I have drank such a strong tea. How many leaves did you add...?"

"Hey hey. I know you said this was your first time, but there's no need to quiver with such excitement~"

"So that was why they were looking for desserts, to balance the flavor. Understandable... Renner, you were right to not drink it."

"How rude. Not even the term 'oni' could do you justice, oni boss."

"Haaaah, just try to make something more edible next time."

Lakyus picked up her cup and slipped from the corner of her lips. Her expression twisted into something resembling the character. Just how thick was the tea?

Tia, who stood next to Lakyus stole glances at her and asked in a matter-of-fact tone, "Is it tasty?"

"Hah? If I am being honest, it is too bitter. I would not call it good — hugh!"

Lakyus' expression began to contort.

She pushed Tia aside and held on to her stomach. The items on the table shook as she wobbled.

In the midst of the chaos, Climb finally noticed that Lakyus' gown had been stained red. A thin, stick-like object had been thrust through her.

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18. A Japanese pun; 鬼 (oni), meaning demon, versus 悪鬼 (akki), meaning evil.

He could not comprehend what had happened. His brain could not accept what he was seeing right now.

Who would have thought that Lakyus would be penetrated by Tia?

Lakyus was also in a confused state, not even casting healing magic on herself. It was as though she was trying her best to understand what was happening.

Gagaran ran to Lakyus' side.

Climb thought that she was rushing over to help, but things turned out for the worse as Gagaran struck Lakyus' stomach with a heavy punch.

Lakyus remained defenseless against that attack, thinking that her companion was rushing over to help her. Gagaran struck her in the stomach with the force of a battering ram.

"Ooof!"

"Let me do it."

Tia impaled Lakyus with a new spike as the air was knocked out of her, rendering her unable to breathe.

His eyes did not deceive him, there was some sort of liquid at the tip of the spike. It must have been some sort of poison.

"Your Highness."

Climb tugged Renner's hand, hid her behind his frame, and moved towards one of the corners. Tia and Gagaran ignored him entirely, choosing to repeatedly attack Lakyus instead.

Lakyus tried her best to dodge their attacks but faced with the duo's combos she could not even properly defend herself, never mind dodging. The gearless Lakyus could not put up an effective resistance against the fully geared Tia and Gagaran.

Climb angrily yelled towards the silent spectator, Evileye.

"What in the world is going on?!"

"Don't move. Otherwise I will not only target you with my magic, but the Princess as well."

Climb was about to draw his sword but stopped himself when he saw that Evileye had raised a hand in his and Renner's direction. He naturally should be assisting Lakyus, but Renner was more important to him. Protecting Renner took absolute priority.

Climb wanted to lead Renner out of the room, but the moment he moved a crystal shortsword was embedded in the floor by his foot.

"Don't move. Do not leave this room. If you disobey me, I'll... hack off... one

of the Princess' legs...? As long as you listen to me, I will not harm you."

Climb was powerless in the face of Evileye's threats.

If I rendezvoused with Brain — if I informed Tina of the current situation... While Climb pondered, the unusual situation among the members of Blue Rose continued to unfold.

Tia appeared to be muttering something to Lakyus.

"I've been making observations for quite a while now, looking for ways to kill Lakyus... Normal methods would be resisted, so a combination of magic and poison would have to be used. That is the only way to do it. Surely not even you could resist the effect of multiple poisons simultaneously, right? Evileye, it's your turn."

"Alright."

Confused, groveling, and saddened. Pain was not the only thing conveyed through Lakyus' expression, what stood out amongst them all was her inability to understand what was happening at all. Evileye casted a spell at her.

"I get it. [Resist Weakening] ...No use. She resisted it."

"What even."

Gagaran landed yet another hit on Lakyus' belly, the part of her body that she had minimized her own stature to protect, like a turtle retreating into its shell. Tia took out a new needle and stabbed it into Lakyus without any hesitation.

"[Resist Weakening]... alright. Now then — [Charm Person]. Done. Good job, you two. We did it."

Gagaran and Tia pulled away from Lakyus.

"Lakyus, quick, heal yourself."

"Yes, understood. Tia, could you help me pull these out?"

Lakyus spoke as if nothing had happened. The terror of mind-control made Climb tremble with fear.

Just as Tia was about to do it, Evileye raised her voice to stop her in her tracks.

"Don't. If you inflict pain on her now, you'll be treated as a hostile and the magic may be dispelled. Lakyus, sorry but pull them out yourself. Those shouldn't have pierced too deeply."

"Its purpose was only to inject the poison, so the needle itself isn't too thick... it's the type that would be rendered ineffective if you were wearing armor."

"I know, but pulling it out myself will still require a bit of resolve."

Lakyus bit down on her lower lip and pulled the needle out. She then began to cast healing magic on the hole.

“Gagaran. Open the window and let some air in… What should we do about the blood on the floor?”

“Most of it was absorbed by her dress so not much made it onto the floor. No need to worry about it.”

Renner replied calmly. Everybody other than him was speaking in such a tranquil manner that Climb felt like what he was witnessing was an illusion. It was as if he had been transported to an unfamiliar world.

“Woah. Completely unshaken. I knew from the start that you had guts.”

“I do not think so…” Renner said with a puzzled expression, “I just felt that everyone would not just harm each other for no reason at all… but mind-control is really scary though… Climb, what did you think about this?”

“Yes, I had the same thought.”

“So… could you tell us why you did this?”

“What if I told you that I won’t?”

“Are you not the least bit apologetic that you have soiled this room?”

Evileye appeared to be laughing behind her mask.

“Alright, nothing I could say about that. The reason is simple. Compared to the Kingdom or whatever else, we believe our companions’ lives to be far more important. That’s about it.”

“Defending the capital was oni boss’ decision anyways. We were against it deep down from the start.”

“But if we told her that, this dumbass would definitely say, ‘Then I will defend it on my own’ or something. So, we decided that our only option was to forcefully take her away, but daylight kidnappings aren’t so easy. Neither did we have confidence in our ability to trick her into leaving too, so, though we must apologize to Your Highness the Princess for what we’ve done, we had to exploit this opportunity.”

Tia and Gagaran shrugged in agreement. This must have been a collective decision made by Blue Rose barring Lakyus of course. Brain still had not returned yet, so Tina must be keeping him busy.

“But no matter what, this was far too excessive.”

“Haaaah, that’s what I said as well, but these guys—”

“It would be bad if she got on high alert after rejecting our suggestion… to catch an oni… to catch Lakyus out for sure required her to be completely off her guard. This is me speaking from experience.”

“So there is a whole system around this?”

“Aye. We used five types of poison, didn’t let her wear her gear, used debuff magic, and yet still had to rely on luck to see if we could charm her. That was why we had to go through all of this trouble, if even one of those elements was missing, we would have failed. Now then—” Evileye clapped her hands together, “After Tina comes back, we’ll head back to the inn with [Teleportation], pick up Lakyus’ equipment, and teleport out of this city.”

Evileye looked towards Climb and Renner.

“...Oy, opportunities like this won’t come twice. You know I could take you guys along with me, right? I’ll be frank with you, this country is doomed and the fate that awaits the princess of a doomed nation won’t be a pretty one. This might be your last chance at escaping.”

Climb could not help but look towards Renner.

Wasn’t this exactly what he had hoped for?

If it was teleportation, they could escape even if the city were surrounded. Plus, what Evileye had said was the truth. Whatever fate awaited Renner would not be kind at all, nor was there any other way he could foresee this situation playing out. After all, their enemy was a nation of undead that trampled over the innocent.

“I wish to ask a question. Where will you be heading to?”

“Well, first things first, we have to leave this country. About that... we’ll probably be heading Southeast, I think? If we kept moving in that direction, there is a country that fell into ruin long ago. The capital there — we’ll be heading to the ruins cleansed by fire. Since that place is quite a ways away, we will have to teleport multiple times. Mmmm, in any case it’s a faraway land, one that none of you have heard of.”

“Is that so...”

Renner slightly lowered her head. Was she hesitating? Not long after, she lifted her head as if she had made a resolute decision.

“Thank you, but I cannot go.”

“Is that so...”

Evileye did not continue speaking.

Panicked feelings began to arise in Climb’s heart. If that was her decision, then Renner’s fate was set in stone. That was all he could think of.

True loyalty. Was it not what the members of Blue Rose had demonstrated? Shouldn’t he take Renner to safety, regardless of whether he had to resort to violence or not?

To escape the frustration welling up within him, he looked towards Renner whose smile told him that she understood him completely. This was the expression that graced Climb every time she was about to lay down the truth.

"Climb. As royalty, I must fulfill my duties even if it costs me my life."

He felt as though he had just been punched.

While Renner's existence as a person was important to him, of equal value was her status as his royal liege.

In these situations, having to attend to one's royal duties was not a good thing at all. Yet, Renner, as royalty, as one who cared for her own people, was still willing to stay true to her royal status till the end.

Compared to him, someone whose thoughts were solely on survival, how magnanimous was she?

Climb made his resolve.

His responsibility in the end, will be to let Renner live for as long as possible, even if only for a second more. He will die at the hands of the Sorcerer Kingdom's army, serving as Renner's shield till the very end.

At the same time Climb steeled himself, he heard Evileye quietly say, "How rowdy." Knocks came ringing from the door as it opened, stood outside were Brain and Tina, holding filled trays.

"We found and brought some desserts over."

"Because the guy next to us had a bone to pick with me, it took a while, were we able to make it— What? What the hell happened here?"

Although the windows were open, Brain was still able to pick up on the faint smell of blood that lingered. He shifted his center of mass downwards as he carefully looked around the room.

"...Lady over there. There's blood on your clothes — did someone suspicious show up?"

"No—"

"Don't mind it. Just ask Her Highness about it after we leave."

Gagaran interrupted Lakyus to say. Perhaps he still felt uneasy, Brain shot a glance at Renner. One could sense the question "is everything alright?" from his eyes alone. If Renner had responded in the negative, he would have probably unsheathed his sword.

"Everything is fine. There is nothing to be on guard for."

Brain's gaze turned to Climb.

Climb replied in the same manner as Renner.

"...Is that so? That's good to hear then."

"Ah, right. Brain Unglaus, I have a question for you. Want to get away from this place?"

"...What?"

Upon hearing Evileye's question, Brain began to survey the room once more.

"What are those two planning to do?" Brain answered with his own question as his gaze swung towards Climb and Renner. His lips curved into a smile after Evileye shook her head. "Is that so. If that's the case — no, no matter what, I would not have chosen to run away — there is no point in it anyway... Honestly... I said back then that I'd choose the path of least resistance, but now it looks like I'll have to revise that statement."

"...Really? I thought you'd respond this way, guess I was right."

The members of Blue Rose gathered around Evileye and suddenly vanished as if they had already bid farewell. All that was left behind of them was the smell of blood and black tea.

This was supposed to be their final farewell, yet it ended so abruptly. But, considering the pain those two must feel when they have no choice but to separate, perhaps there was no better alternative to this farewell.

However, those were Climb's thoughts, not Renner's.

She must have been dealt a mental blow, so how should he comfort her? Climb stole a glance at Renner and saw that she was listless. The gentle smile that usually hung on her face was nowhere to be seen, it was like she had put on a mask.

It must have had an extreme impact on her.

Climb stood beside Renner.

"Princess, I can imagine the shock you must be going through right now, but..."

He could not finish his sentence. It was more accurate to say that he did not want to finish that sentence. While he wanted to say that he would stay with her till the end, how could he ever compare to that adamantite-ranked adventurer, who was both a noblewoman and Renner's friend. Still, he had to comfort the Princess somehow, so he racked his brain.

Maybe his intentions were conveyed well enough, because Renner's expression suddenly changed. It was back to her normal, gentle smile.

"I'm fine~, Climb... Never mind that, Brain-san has important matters to attend to does he not?"

“Ahhh... Then, Your Highness, Climb. The timing is about right, it’s time for me to say goodbye. I apologize but I will have to leave now.”

What was this sudden development?

Climb could not understand what Brain was thinking, so he asked a question.

“Where are you going?”

“Hmmm? I plan to challenge the Sorcerer King in single combat. Mmmm, I’d most likely lose, but I should be able at the very least cut down one of his subordinates.”

Brain took off the sword he kept by his waist side, threw it towards Climb, and said, “I’m returning this.”

“Wha?! What are you talking about?! The only one fit to wield this sword is the one who inherited Stronoff-sama’s will! Brain-san!”

“Oy oy, I told you back then didn’t I? I am not inheriting his will. First of all, this is one of the national treasures right? It’s not befitting someone as lowly as me. Princess-san, sorry, but please do return this to His Majesty.”

“I understand.”

“Princess-sama!”

“—Climb, Brain-san has already made his decision.”

“As expected of Princess -san, you’re a good woman. That said, I don’t really understand women anyway. Mmmm, how do I put this.” Brain stood upright. “This is probably my last farewell. Princess, I have thoroughly enjoyed my time here. Climb— back then, I was lucky to have met you and Sebas-san. It resuscitated me... and I am grateful for that.”

Brain turned his back on them and began to march forward.

“You and Gazef, it was my honor to have met the both of you.”

As those words fell, Brain’s silhouette disappeared behind the other side of the door.

“...How did it end up this way... Sorcerer King... if only you didn’t exist...”

Everything around Climb was being destroyed. Everything other than what was most important to him had been taken away and even that might not be long for this world. Her time was running out.

“Climb, I want to hand this sword off to my dear father first.”

The depressive mood had gotten a hold on him and those words managed to pull him back. Indeed, until that moment came, he had sworn to give his all to her — to save the woman who had saved him, to serve the person most important to him.

"...Say, that, this, umm." The sounds coming out of Renner's mouth did not match the atmosphere of the room just then at all. "Can I hold the sword for a moment?"

"Eh? Okay, yes!"

After he handed over the sword, Renner drew it out.

"It is quite heavy."

Renner handed the sheath to Climb. The blade of the Razor Edge was honed and could cut through armor like paper. Before Climb could say "It's dangerous," Renner began to wave the sword around in the air.

Climb was a little shocked. Indeed, because of the weight, her movements were wobbly, causing the tip of the blade to nick the floorboard. That was purely because she did not have enough strength to wield it, because her training still shone through her stance and movements. He could feel the sharpness of the blade from afar. If a man without experience were to swing this sword around, he would not have been able to make the sword gleam the way it did in her hands.

"Uuugh — Hmmm. I'm not too suited for this."

"N-no, not at all. I believe that if you trained more, you should be able to win against me in a duel."

"You jest. Plus, it is unlikely that I will ever hold a sword again."

Renner sheathed the sword after Climb passed it to her and handed it back to Climb.

"Now then, let us head to my father's side, but before then—" Renner looked at herself.

"I need to make some preparations."

•

Brain Unglaus walked through the empty streets of the capital. Usually these streets would be bustling with life, yet today not another soul could be seen. Everyone was hiding in their homes out of fear for the Sorcerer King, but Brain knew that would not bring them salvation.

Brain was around Renner for long enough to know that the Sorcerer King had no reason to not destroy the capital.

However, if someone were to ask him "How can we be saved?" he would not know how to respond.

If everybody coordinated and ran from the capital in all directions, surely some of them would make it out alive. That was the only answer he had.

Brain looked towards the buildings along the street, every door and window was shut tight. They must have been nailed shut from the inside so there was no easy way in.

Now... behind those doors there must be quite a few suicides or even entire families dead...

It was impossible for that to not be the case.

Rumors had already conveyed the terror inflicted by the Sorcerer King's army.

He thought about how this situation could be turned around if the gods were willing. If every citizen in the capital could rise up for vengeance — though it would be useless, it would probably give the enemy a good scare. But for that to happen, someone had to unite the people under one banner.

If it were the Princess, she could probably achieve it, but she did not seem like she wanted to make such a move.

If it were not me here, but him instead, would things have turned out differently...? Perhaps.

He knew very well that they did not have any chance at victory in a battle, Brain saw it in his eyes when he led the army of 400,000 away. Yet he could not look past the 0.01% — no, the 0.000001% or even 0.0000000001% chance that they could win.

Zanac may have led them on a suicidal mission, but it was not for a pipedream. He had just acted according to their best bet in that scenario.

—Just like what Brain was about to do.

Brain laughed in his lonesome and felt something.

Has the air... changed?

Nothing had changed in actuality, the capital still smelled the way it always did, but there was a noticeable difference. This was something a warrior could come to understand after experiencing multiple near-death battles. It was somewhat different from a pungent smell, it was a sort of psychological smell.

It was the same smell he smelled back when he and Climb looked towards E-Rantel's night sky.

The smell of loss and defeat.

Has the Sorcerer King's army finally made their move?

That was the only reason he could think of for such a sudden change.

An opportunity had come.

If Brain were to not use any tricks when approaching the Sorcerer King, the probability that he could make it to his side was really low. No, that was an understatement — it would be correct to say that he did not have a chance at all.

However, there was a chance that he could accomplish his goal in the midst of the chaos of battle. Of course, that depended on the security situation of the enemy's camp. Still, to trample over a city as big as the capital would require breaks in formation and subsequently, lowered guards.

Brain stopped walking to mull over his next moves and saw the walls turn white.

It was as though white paint had been poured over it.

Wails could be heard from afar.

This was the start of the siege. The wails had come from the temporary shelters built for refugees from other cities near the walls. The enemy's target had to be the castle, so there probably will not be any refugees running towards Brain — towards the castle.

What should I do? Would it be better to abandon the initial plan once the siege began?

His initial plan was to get out of the capital first and wait for the moment the enemy's army entered the capital. He was planning to slip past the army in the chaos of the siege to get closer to the Sorcerer King.

However, if the enemy had already made their way into the capital, it would be better for him to hide for now, wait for the army to pass over, and then go out of the city walls.

But if he did that, there was a high chance that the Sorcerer King might choose to leave his encampment. He had to first figure out where he was so he would not waste time running towards nothing.

Perhaps he could hide near the castle and wait till the Sorcerer King led his army inward to strike.

Well, in any case—

All of these plans rely on me hiding myself.

That said, he would not have to perfectly mask his presence like a rogue or assassin. He should be fine as long as he hid out of the enemy's sight.

While he considered where to best hide, the city gates began to crumble. The white shrapnel being splintered off the gates reflected light in such a brilliant and beautiful way that Brain could not help but stop and admire this sight, even in this situation.

Was that... some kind of skill? But if he thought about it, he was about to make

an enemy out of the Sorcerer King, one who could summon all sorts of deplorable beings. Nothing should be out of the ordinary for him at this point.

A tiny dot stepped over the collapsed gates. It only appeared tiny because it was so far away, adjusted for perspective it must be a giant compared to the average human.

Even though it had stepped over the threshold, no soldiers were rushing over to stop it. There could only be one reason why.

They were all dead.

Brain's entire body began to shudder.

That had to be a super monster or something.

The being's figure slowly began to increase in size, its stride slow and steady.

Brain's expression became contorted.

This was a being with overwhelming physical strength, so its speed should be on par. To advance through an empty street should not take it too much time, so why was it wasting so much time—

Ahhh, indeed. They have already breached the capital's defenses, so the ensuing massacre should be easy for them. They can take as much time as they want!

It was then not strange for the enemy to be at ease.

However — Brain squinted and looked towards his slowly approaching yet still far away opponent.

This was the street where he was picked up, forcefully pulled along by Gazef.

This was the street he ran down with Climb to raid the Eight Finger's facility, where he met Sebas.

This was the street he led the children destined to become the next Warrior-Captains down.

This road was now being stomped upon carelessly by a monster. The road Brain had walked down with everyone he held dear was being stomped on.

Unforgivable.

Brain changed his mind. He no longer gave a damn about the Sorcerer King. Right here, right now, this monster in front of him—

—He swore to make it pay.

The children under Brain's protection had already left this place.

Have they made it out safely, I wonder? They were like seeds he had sown for the future, the source of his calm. Perhaps — there was a 0.01% chance, no, a 0.000001% chance that one of them would grow up to become powerful enough to rival the Sorcerer King. These pipedreams of his further improved his mood.

Brain stood at the middle of the road, waiting for his opponent to get closer.

It must seem terribly foolish!

What he should have done was hide and wait for an opportunity to take revenge on the Sorcerer King, and not oppose the monster that served as their vanguard.

An onlooker might say something along the lines of, "look at the bigger picture, don't do something so stupid," to him.

However, Brain's goal in life was to live by his sword, so he would rather blindly allow himself to battle with his all.

After a considerable amount of time had passed, it was finally at a distance where he could make out most of its features.

His opponent was not human.

Yet he could innately understand that this light-cyan giant was of a race far superior to his own.

Not long after—

...So cold!

From this opponent's direction was a gale whipped up and sent towards him, its temperature as cold as a frosty winter's day. Brain's entire body trembled, not because he had felt any bloodlust or an oppressive aura, but from the chill breeze alone. The white puffs of breath coming out of Brain's mouth proved that this was no illusion.

"What...?"

He could not help but mutter to himself.

Was his opponent a being that radiated cold air? Now that he thought about it, the gates just then — was it not shrouded in ice and then rammed into pieces?

Just how cold is he...

The gate was not small at all, so whatever domain this monster belonged to, it was seriously terrifying to him.

That said — he knew this already.

Brain tightened his grip on his katana and waited for his opponent.

His hands trembled, not out of excitement nor from the cold, but out of a certain emotion.

The emotion known as fear.

Time after another he lamented in his heart, the heart that told him to move aside and cower in the corner. That thing, although it is a monster, the way it pulled its halberd along the ground as it walked radiated a warrior's aura. If he

curled up at the sides, perhaps he would be ignored like a pebble.

The houses that lined the sides of the street had signs of life, but none seemed like they wanted anything to do with this.

And because of that — Brain should perhaps do the same.

If he did that, his life would probably be spared.

But — his legs refused to move.

He was not running away from this one.

He focused his strength onto the one hand that gripped the hilt and slapped himself with the other.

"Alright!"

He no longer trembled. He had made his resolve, in body and soul.

While it had already visually identified Brain's presence, the light-cyan giant continued forward without changing its pace.

The being that held a halberd in one hand emanated an ever-increasing sense of pressure as the distance between them gradually shrunk. Brain gulped down a mouthful of saliva.

Brain waited, like a roadblock for the light-cyan giant.

Because of its overwhelming presence, Brain failed to notice that there were women behind the being until now. They were dressed in white, their skins a similar hue to its, their long hair were black, and from them were chill winds rushing towards him too.

He was made acutely aware of their gazes on him.

The enemy had not taken any action against Brain, who stood in their path, yet.

He pulled out a bottle from the belt by his waist and downed it in one go. He drank another bottle after that, and another after that. In total, Brain had applied three types of magical buffs on his body.

Even though he had drunk the potions, an act of aggression in and of itself, his enemies did not seem to plan to attack right away. Still, he felt something akin to fighting spirit from them.

The distance between them had been closed to around five meters or so.

Oy oy oy, another sheer cliff to overcome, eh?

At this distance, it was made all the clearer to Brain that his opponent was a being that held absolute superiority over him. It had reached heights that Brain could never even hope to reach. To Brain, one who had raised his abilities by a mere finger's length in comparison, this was a being he had absolutely no chance

of winning against.

Even so — even though he knew that, Brain still refused to move aside.

His opponents stopped its movement.

The distance between them was three meters.

Considering the length of its arm and the halberd in its hand, Brain was already well within its strike range.

"—Brain Unglaus."

He declared his name, raised his sword, and focused his mind.

"One. Who. Serves. Under. The. Rule. Of. The. Supreme. Being, His. Majesty. Ainz. Ooal. Gown, Cocytus."

In the moment, Brain's eyes widened in shock.

That was probably his opponent's name. He had not expected to receive a reply at all.

While he was shocked, he also felt déjà vu.

What was it? He felt like he had heard this name before but he could not remember from where. Perhaps he was just overthinking it.

And then, Brain felt unbearable shame at how rude he had been.

The opponent in front of him was willing to respond to him, yet he was so rude to be lost in his own muddy memories.

The reason why his thoughts went in that direction was because his opponent was a monster he could never hope to match, it was probably on the same level as Sebas or Shalltear Bloodfallen. That meant that to his opponent, he was nothing more than an ant in his way. Despite all of that, his opponent did not treat him like an inferior being.

If their roles had been reversed, what would Brain do? He would have probably just cut him down without much consideration and continued on his way. Brain was so insignificant in comparison to his opponent, he probably could not even leave an impression of himself in his mind.

Brain straightened his back and gently lowered his head, like what a student would do for his instructor.

"Thank you very much."

"No. Need."

Brain gripped onto the hilt of his katana tightly. *Stronger, stronger!*

To raise his weapons against a being who possessed overwhelming power without a plan felt like he was betraying the goodwill of those who had saved him. What he was doing right now was no different than suicide.

Also, if he thought about it, what use would stopping the enemy here be?

None at all.

Yet still—

I'm such an idiot, this Cocytus-danna couldn't be the only one attacking this city. I have failed those two... no, I'm no longer a child. My future is what I make it out to be. That's right... it's in my hands and my hands only!

Cocytus, who was looking at Brain, stuck his halberd into the ground.

"—God. Slaying. Emperor. Blade."

An ōdachi of gigantic proportions, much longer than Brain's height, was pulled out of thin air, with which Cocytus assumed the jōdan[19] stance.

This was such an honor.

Words need not be exchanged. Cocytus had already conveyed his wish to resolve this by the blade.

Brain breathed out heavily and rapidly drew in air again. It was like he was trying to expel all of the air remaining in his lungs.

He was completely defenseless while doing so, yet Cocytus did not move a single inch. From his posture Brain could tell that he held massive respect for him.

Not only was his strength top-tier, but so was his character.

If he was of a similar level to the monster known as Shalltear, then he could probably make use of his weapon at speeds far greater than anything Brain could achieve, even in such an upright position. Even so, Cocytus still held his stance.

This wasn't because he viewed Brain as a formidable opponent.

But under the pretext that Brain had made his resolve, Cocytus was treating him with the honor of a fellow warrior.

Such an action overwhelmed Brain with joy.

He's not the same as Shalltear!

No, it would be rude of him to compare the two.

Hmm? Shalltear? Cocytus? I swear I heard his name somewhere... I think — No, don't! How are you still wasting time on these unnecessary thoughts in times like these? What an idiot.

Brain concentrated his brainpower solely onto the matter of victory.

To parry the jōdan strike of this giant's ōdachi would undoubtedly be difficult. If his opponent had similar physical attributes as Shalltear, receiving the blow

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19. 上段の構え (jōdan-no-kamae), one of the five stances of kendo.

with his katana on its own would not be able to stop it in its tracks. Brain's head would probably be cleaved in half, his katana would probably break too.

So, should he try to dodge Cocytus' first strike?

No, even if he got lucky and dodged the first attack, it's not like his opponent would just stop there. The second and third strikes were sure to be continuous after that point. The common strategy would be to deflect your opponent's first strike and counterattack while they're correcting their stance. However, against this extraordinary foe, to even disrupt his balance and stance would require Brain's full strength. That meant that even if he achieved this, he would not have enough strength leftover to counterattack. Because of that, Cocytus would probably end the fight by slashing upwards as a follow-up.

Which meant that—

This is a do-or-die situation, isn't it?

He remembered something Vesture had said to him.

If he wanted to win against Cocytus, he had no options other than to strike a few milliseconds faster than him. That said, even if he managed to pierce Cocytus' body or head, it would not change the path of his blade. The battle would end with both of them striking each other.

So he had to aim for Cocytus' wrist, the one holding onto his blade.

To wish to move faster than a monster on Shalltear's level and cut down his wrist was an absolute joke.

But—

This is my only option, I have no choice but to use that move...

Brain lowered his waist.

He adopted the posture for the technique capable of cutting down Shalltear Bloodfallen's nail — [Hidden Blade Nail Clipper].

—No.

This was no longer merely [Hidden Blade Nail Clipper].

Originally, [Nail Clipper] was a move that incorporated the martial art that guaranteed a hit, [Field], the lightning-fast [God Flash], and [Fourfold Slash of Light]. The crystallization of every skill under Brain's employ still took all of his strength to chip off Shalltear's nail. Of course, to have cut off her nail was already a momentous achievement — it would not be too strange for it to become a legend passed down through history even. However, Brain did not rest his laurels there, he continued to push forward for the sole purpose of reaching the same peak as she did.

It was for this reason that Brain sought to become stronger, going as far as to request assistance from that person — Gazef Stronoff's teacher and former adamantite-ranked adventurer, Vesture Croff di Laufen. Under his assistance and through nonstop training, he was finally able to use [Sixfold Slash of Light]. Unfortunately, he was unable to reach the level of understanding that Gazef had of that art.

So while the use of [Field] and [God Flash] remained the same, the use of [Sixfold Slash of Light] over [Fourfold Slash of Light] made it a new technique.

Martial arts used something akin to focus. The stronger the martial art was, the more of it was required. Exceptional warriors — higher-level warriors, while they had a greater capacity for it, would also find it difficult to use multiple martial arts at the same time. Indeed, Brain had greater reserves of focus than your average warrior, but he had already reached his limit back when he used [Nail Clipper] against Shalltear.

So it should have been impossible for him to use [Sixfold Slash of Light], a much more focus-intensive art than [Fourfold Slash of Light], with his other martial arts.

There was only one reason why he could despite all of that.

The Brain Unglaus who stood there had already surpassed Gazef Stronoff — he had entered the realm of heroes.

All of this culminated in Brain's new technique — [True Nail Clipper].

Cocytus moved his foot slightly forward to close the distance between them, a really short distance that was.

Considering the difference in their strength, it would not be strange for Cocytus to easily close the gap between them and hack straight down with his ōdachi.

So why did he do such a thing?

The answer was simple, he wished to grant Brain a death that was befitting of a warrior.

Brain's appreciation for Cocytus as a warrior deepened once more as he assumed the stance of [True Nail Clipper].

Not... yet...

Not... in range...

The magical buffs granted to Brain by his potions meant that he was much stronger than he was when he faced Shalltear.

Even so.

The human named Brain Unglaus could not hope to reach the domain of the monsters like Cocytus.

There was nothing he could do about it. After all, it was impossible for an ant to prevail against a Dragon. A fact that was hard to swallow, but he had to nonetheless.

Still, he did not wish to lose. What should he do? It would be good to reduce the overwhelming gap in strength between them even if by a little, but how should he go about accomplishing that?

—I am a warrior, so I must do as a warrior would!

"—[Ability Boost]!"

Brain activated a martial art.

He had expended all his reserves for [True Nail Clipper], there should not have been anything left for other martial arts.

However — Brain's eyes began to fill with blood and blood began to stream down his nostrils. His capillaries had just burst.

A *shing* sound rang out as if to signify a transition. His physical capabilities were boosted to the next level.

He activated another martial art.

His physical capabilities were boosted once more.

But — *Not... yet...*

He was still unable to do it.

So what should he do?

There was only one answer.

Brain activated yet another martial art.

"—[Greater Ability Boost]!"

Brain Unglaus had yet again, achieved something impossible.

He did not know this himself.

The true nature of his Talent was an increase in his focus capacity, only with this and the addition of his higher levels was he able to activate the martial arts required by [True Nail Clipper].

But, even so, Brain had his limits. He could not use any more martial arts than that, a limit imposed upon him by the world.

But, in that moment — Brain broke the rules of this world once more.

A second miracle of this kind.

The first was when he cut Shalltear's nail.

The second, was made in this moment.

The consequence of breaking the rules was that his body began to deteriorate.

His body probably couldn't last for even one more minute.

However, to those who were strong, a minute was a long time.

Cocytus entered—

Into Brain's range—

The God-Slaying Emperor Blade in jōdan—

Brain pulled out his own katana to receive the attack from Cocytus' ōdachi—

And then—

—the sound of blood and flesh being rended could be heard.

After swinging the God-Slaying Emperor Blade, Cocytus shook off the blood and fat from the katana and returned it to its space. He pulled his halberd from the ground and looked down at the corpse of the man he had just slain.

He is — *was* a fine warrior.

Cocytus was unscathed, the blade did not manage to reach him, yet his skills as a warrior was commendable.

...I have never heard of such an excellent warrior...

It was such a shame that he had to kill him.

If it was possible, he wanted to save his life and have him become loyal to his master. He could have easily broken his opponent's sword, tanked his hit, or broke all four of his limbs, but that is not the way of a warrior.

Cocytus had already sensed it when he saw this man standing on his own from afar, he knew it all the better when he stood face-to-face with him: this was a warrior who had made his resolve.

Cocytus could not dishonor such a man.

He knew exactly how beneficial it would be to bring him under their rule, but still killed him. It would not be wrong to say that he had betrayed Nazarick.

Still.

He wished to converse with him through the clash of their blades.

If Warrior Takemikazuchi were here, he would probably praise Cocytus for his decision.

By levels, he was probably around level 40.

However, he felt that other than that single strike, there was not much else power in him. Perhaps it was something like Cocytus' Vidyārāja Strike, or perhaps he had used special abilities to strengthen himself.

He was insignificant in comparison to Cocytus, but in this world's terms he was strong.

Cocytus picked up the katana Brain dropped.

"I. Will. Be. Taking. This."

Among the weapons in Cocytus' possession, this was exceptionally weak — something that was practically useless to him. Perhaps it would be better to lay this sword by his side to mark his grave, but Cocytus decided to take the sword.

He was not too keen to leave his body as it is.

"You. All, Freeze. This. Man."

After he gave his command to the Frost Virgins, the body of the man named Brain began to slowly freeze over.

Just as Cocytus was about to step over Brain, he stopped himself again.

He looked towards the castle behind Brain.

"....."

Cocytus turned his head around while deep in thought.

He turned right and walked into a path that was narrower than the one before. He walked down the path until he emerged onto the main street again, after which he took another right turn. He walked along while confirming the castle's position, taking every right turn detour that he saw which brought him back to the main street.

Cocytus looked towards his right.

Brain's remains were now quite a distance away.

Cocytus then silently walked towards his left — towards the castle.

•

"Hello~, don't get in my way~"

Aura called out to the cowering soldiers on top of the city walls. She made use of the imperfections along the wall to make her way up in a single breath.

While the soldiers at the top wanted to use their spears to attack, what they witnessed next were inhuman movements — she jumped over the soldiers, spun around mid-air—

"Hyup!"

—And landed perfectly on the other side of the battlements.

"V!"

Her hands formed into a V-shaped gesture for the lined-up soldiers to see.

The eyes pointed towards Aura, whose appearance was that of a child's, were

all filled with fear. Having seen her unusually light body in action, surely none of them still believed her to be a normal child. Plus, there was also the matter of the magical beast down below, waiting for her.

Aura ignored the humans and pulled out a piece of paper from the pocket by her waist casually.

The soldiers advanced towards Aura step-by-step to surround her, their spears were pointed towards her yet she continued to ignore them.

"Okay, everybody. I'll say this again~ — Do not get in my waaay~ —"

Aura unrolled the paper to compare the capital in front of her with what was drawn on the map.

If all of the landmarks matched up, it would be much easier to read.

She easily found the Magician's Guild, her first intended destination.

Aura, now satisfied, turned around to see the soldiers surrounding her. The tips of a few spears were positioned right in front of her eyes at a distance where a slight movement would cause her to touch them.

"Say, even if I was the only one to have climbed up here, was it really a smart idea to focus your attention on me? You know they'll come up here as well, right?"

The soldiers looked at each other and sprung like springs to the outer edge of the walls, but it was already too late. Aura's magical beasts climbed up the wall one after the other.

Their surroundings echoed with the pitiful wails of other soldiers.

Aura had greater combat prowess than them and while it was true that appearances could be deceiving, this was still too much to bear for them.

The soldiers who had completely lost their will to fight, began to stampede over each other to get out of her vicinity first.

There still were soldiers who held the idea that this position had to be defended, but with so many of their compatriots scurrying away, it was hard for them to maintain their morale.

The city walls were thick, so the battlements were quite wide, but the fear-driven soldiers still pushed and shoved each other in their attempts to run away. If there was any semblance of order to their rout, they would have probably made it out faster. Those pushing each other at the front made for an absolutely chaotic getaway.

Although it would be trivial for the magical beasts to chase after them and exterminate them all, they were not interested in doing that at all. They had not

received orders from their master yet, which was why they were letting them go. That was true for all of the magical beasts except one.

A level 71 magical beast, the largest one she had brought along for the occasion, an Iris Tyrannus Basileus. Its posture matches that of the Tyrannosaurus Rex, but it also has dorsal fins at the back. As its name suggested, it shined with vibrant light. Aura was not too sure on the specifics, but she did remember that her master had said, “Its original design had to be based off of the King of the Monsters.”

The Iris Tyrannus Basileus roared.

A roar loud enough to make the ground clatter.

That was not to assert dominance or an expression of its own emotions.

It was a type of special ability — [Petrifying Bellow].

If one had a similar level to it or had resistances against mental effects, it would just be an annoying roar. The routing soldiers were about to demonstrate what would happen if you satisfied neither of said conditions.

Fear twisted their expressions to the extreme as soldiers began to fall.

Fear-induced instant death.

It did not do this because the death of the scurrying humans brought it joy, but simply because it had found the inconvenience of having to constantly shift its sightline around to be annoying. The soldiers died for that kind of a reason.

But it was not as though the Iris Tyrannus Basileus came out of this unscathed, the cost of such a power was great.

Surrounding the Iris Tyrannus Basileus were five of the six remaining beasts — the level 78 Fenrir, the level 77 Hound of the Wild Hunt, the level 76 Kirin, the level 76 Amphisbaena, and the level 74 Basilisk.

The Kirin started off by bucking it, followed by the Hound of the Wild Hunt trampling on it. The other magical beasts joined in one after the other to kick the Iris Tyrannus Basileus.

“You’re too damn loud,” was probably what they were trying to convey.

While combat prowess had nothing to do with this, it was still getting bullied by magical beasts with higher levels than itself. The Iris Tyrannus Basileus tried to seek sympathy from Aura by whimpering, which only caused the other magical beasts to intensify their attacks.

If their previous attacks were comparable to that of the seniors of a club disciplining their junior, what was happening now was more like a beating brought on by its own faults.

As a side note, the only monster that did not participate in the beatings was the level 58 Avaricious Frog named Gagarpur.

It was a magical beast that looked like something straight out of somebody's nightmare, like a giant frog but... wrong. In its mouth were rows upon rows of dirty yellow teeth and its eyes looked like that of a lecherous middle-aged man.

"That's — it! Guys, I'm not angry, stop bullying Iris-chan right now."

Aura crossed her arms and looked at the magical beasts with half an eye open. The magical beasts began to cry.

"Alright, alright, I'm not angry at you either."

After she said that, the magical beasts — other than the Iris Tyrannus Basileus — gathered around Aura and used their giant bodies to nuzzle against hers.

"Myuu~"

Aura let out an adorable cry. While her physical strength was no less than any of theirs, getting pushed around by their giant bodies still made her let out that sound.

"Hey hey! Gimme some — space!"

In front of Aura, who was clapping her hands together, the magical beasts began to line up — that said, their bodies were huge, so lining up single-file was quite difficult. Each of them found a spot to stand in and switched to uptight expressions. The playful attitudes they had when they rubbed against Aura was nowhere to be seen.

"Now, we'll begin invading into the capital to take over a few of those buildings. It's just sad that a few of you children might not be able to shine is all."

The largest of the bunch, the Iris Tyrannus Basileus, began to look indifferent.

"Then I'll give you a special mission! Walk along the city walls and squish any humans you see."

"BWOOoOoo..."

The Iris Tyrannus Basileus' roar shook the air around them, its voice gradually trailing. It lowered its head and cautiously looked towards the other magical beasts and Aura.

"...Mmm, great. Now then, everyone, the operation has begun! Quick!"

Aura jumped down from the city walls and successfully entered the capital's perimeter. She landed on top of some random roof and ran along the rooftops.

The magical beasts followed along and jumped. Each of them moved in a weightless manner as they trailed behind Aura.

While turning around to check on the magical beasts, Aura noticed that the Iris Tyrannus Basileus was swinging its thick and girthy tail around. Aura waved to it, causing it to wave its tail around with even more fervor; incidentally, it managed to destroy a portion of the battlements.

"「—You need to get moving too!」"

The Iris Tyrannus Basileus jumped up for a second after she gave her orders telepathically and began to ponderously walk along the walls.

Aura's first destination was the Magician's Guild. Because it was home to numerous magic items, it should be on high alert. It was widely considered to be the place that would put up the greatest amount of resistance in the capital.

Although the enemy's combat strength was not an issue, to gather every piece of magic item in that place would probably take a considerable amount of time. Perhaps she would have to call in reinforcements.

Aura cut across the capital through its rooftops as she pondered these things.

The capital spanned a vast amount of land, but to Aura's speed when she was serious, it was not a problem at all.

Not long after she had jumped from the city walls, she arrived at her destination.

None of the magical beasts had slowed her down. Well no, Gagarpur would have slowed her down, so it was carried along by the Basilisk.

Along the long perimeter walls were three five-story towers. The Magician's Guild, what was essentially multiple two-story tall structures that were taller than they were wide, had shut their grid-shaped gates. To the sides of the gate were two two-story tall gatehouses.

She had not detected the presence of people outside, but human activity could be seen inside. Humans were on the watch.

Aura jumped into the guild's land and looked at the map in her hands, comparing the buildings' appearances.

"Mmm-hmm. That's there, so this is here, right?"

Utilizing the intel they had received from their corroborators within the capital, they had a rough sketch of the guild's appearance. Magic items could be somewhere within here.

However, because there were multiple probable spots for them, they were not exactly sure where the magic items were kept. They were not able to capture any high-tier magic casters to question, so Aura had to make her own judgment.

While it was tiresome, the land area held by the Magician's Guild meant that

this was much more efficient than a human wave attack.

"Let's go then."

At the same time Aura began marching towards the gates, people emerged from it. There were five men and a woman. An elderly figure stood in front of them.

Aura suddenly thought, *Oh*.

If they held significant ranks within the Magician's Guild, it would save her a lot of time, but Aura could not help but feel disappointed after taking a look at the elder.

The elder had to be a warrior from his appearance.

He wore typical dojo attire, black from the waist down and a light greenish blue from the waist up. Two swords hung by his waist side and a breastplate covered his torso.

He had a full head of white, not a single strand of hair was black. His arms were slender, as expected of his age, yet they did not sag. They were thin yet hard like steel.

Beast-like perceptive eyes sized Aura up from top to bottom multiple times.

"...Probably, but let us confirm it first. Boy. You are a subordinate of the Sorcerer King, are you not?"

Aura surveyed the humans behind the elder. While they wore similar clothing to him, none of them was with swords. This elder was probably the master of a dojo then, with the others being his disciples.

While she could not figure out what connections the Magician's Guild had to a dojo, there had to be a connection for them to be protecting this place.

Although she felt like they might be able to provide more intel to her than the average magic caster, it would probably be non-essential intel anyways.

"—Why are you not answering? I will have you know that I will not go easy on you, even if you are just a brat."

To have put up such a front in spite of Aura's magical beast was probably because they had not shown any malicious intent or bloodlust. Or perhaps their opponents were brave, had made their resolves, and were confident in themselves.

"Mmm-hmm. Umm, if you're willing to become my guide, I won't kill you, you know? Ah, these children won't attack you either."

Aura planned to keep that promise, since Mare would kill them all later anyway.

“You dare babble your mouth, brat. You may not pass beyond this point. I cannot allow that demon-summoning item to fall into the hands of people like you.”

Aura lost her composure and laughed.

Finding out that the thing was still here was enough for her. She had to secure it and give it back to Demiurge.

“Ah — is that so. So what’s your answer to my question?”

“I refuse. In any case, I, Ves—”

The elder fell down with a thud.

Aura had let loose an arrow.

The elder’s head, pierced by Aura’s lightning-fast arrow, split open like a pomegranate. Its contents spilt all over the place.

“I don’t have time for chitchat — well then, next — looks like everybody’s feeling the same way, huh? If that’s the case, how about you run in and grab a powerful looking magic caster to help me out?”

The humans lined up behind the elder were stunned expressionless. Aura felt like it would be too troublesome to wait till their brains had rebooted so she gave an order to her beasts.

“Kill them all.”

Aura spoke as she walked towards the gate. The magical beasts zoomed past her like a whirlwind and pounced on the remaining humans. Only blood and guts remained on the ground afterwards.

•

Mare sat by himself on top of the second-highest tower in the castle, overlooking the capital.

In the battle that commenced three days before they had arrived at this city, Mare had killed a significant number of humans. Most of them were men however, he had not seen women or children among their ranks. In that case, what was left behind were probably all of the weaklings.

Mare’s expression was filled with sorrow.

He could no longer keep count of how many times he had run those numbers in his head.

—He could not figure it out.

"What should I do..."

If someone else were around, Mare would have consulted them, but no one else was there. Well no, the Hanzos should be there, but they would not appear in front of Mare. Plus, it was useless to ask them this question.

Umm. W-what should I do... to destroy a city this vast more efficiently and kill every human within it...?

Before Mare came to the capital, he had destroyed multiple cities with his master and gained relevant experience for it. That was why he had a clear understanding of how difficult it was to destroy a city — of how difficult of a task it was to kill every single inhabitant in it.

Repeated and continuous use of magic could destroy every structure in the city and render it into a mountain of rubble, but to guarantee that everything within the city died along with that was a difficult thing to do.

For example, if he used magic to induce an earthquake, it would destroy all above-ground structures as well as underground facilities. People within said structures would largely be crushed to death or buried alive.

A magically induced earthquake could not affect things outside of the spell's range, so people hiding in houses in other areas would not notice. The sound of collapsing buildings and the wails of people dying was another matter entirely.

If people heard those noises, there might be a lot of people who would come out of hiding to investigate, look out of windows, or something.

People who cover their eyes and ears in fear were the best, because if they coiled up into balls inside their own homes believing that things would soon pass over, he could just cast another spell and be done with them.

What the problem was, were people who believe that they would be the next to be crushed or the inherently brave bunch. What was even more troublesome were the weaklings who would become suicidal under stress, causing them to run in unpredictable directions.

Their moods were infectious.

Once an inhabitant noticed those who were running away, they would abandon their homes to run away too.

If they chose to run to still-standing structures, things would still be easy. However, terrified people tend to make irrational decisions such as choosing paths through collapsed areas or even try to save others trapped under the debris. They made the situation much more difficult to handle.

I really wish they wouldn't run away...

If it turned into that kind of a situation, he would have to use another area-of-attack spell to kill them, effectively doing twice the work for the same result.

If not for the time constraints, doing things twice over would not be such a big deal, but this was an operation carried out alongside his master. There was no way he could allow such a thing to happen.

Reason being that he would be wasting his master's precious time, but also because he would feel ashamed from having to admit that he was not good enough to end it in one go.

If it were an earthquake-related solution, he could not guarantee that it would kill everybody. There would be more survivors than he would have expected. While he could start a fire just in case to kill those who remain, a fire would be highly visible to people far away. It could also trigger primal flight responses, causing even more people to run away.

What a dilemma.

I have to practice more and become more natural at this!

Bukubukuchagama had gifted Mare the ability to destroy large quantities of enemies. In terms of how wide of an area he could affect, Mare was confident that no other Floor Guardian could rival his abilities.

That was why if he could not successfully destroy the city and kill all of its inhabitants, it would make him question his own worth and existence.

Perhaps Bukubukuchagama would be angry to see Mare like this.

"Nnnnng, nnnnng..."

Mare could not help but imagine Bukubukuchagama disciplining him, causing his eyes to water. Before the tears could fall, Mare wiped them away.

"I have to try my best... Ainz-sama said that too."

Mare was deeply respectful and grateful towards Ainz.

If Ainz had not let Mare to practice demolishing cities and to accrue experience over multiple tries, he would not have been able to grow as much as he did now.

Now that he thought about it, back when the war first started, Mare was asked to destroy a small town. The results of that event were honestly terrible.

Those were results that would bring shame upon Bukubukuchagama.

But while Mare took a gigantic hit to his ego, Ainz's gentle words made him so happy that he could cry.

Ainz had told Mare that as long as he understood that he lacked experience in something, all he had to do was study hard to better himself.

If one of the guardians had told him that, it would not have moved Mare as much as it did. However, the one who said it was a being of equal status to Bukubukuchagama, one of the Supreme Beings.

Mare made his resolve.

He will destroy more towns and cities and kill more people to become the person Bukubukuchagama wanted him to be.

"Okay!"

While his voice was still that of a cute child's, his tone was filled with an unusually strong spirit, not expected of Mare. If the other guardians were to see him now and compare him to the Mare they knew, they would probably be shocked speechless.

"I'll do it right!"

Mare's hands clenched into fists as he held them in front of himself.

In any case, he had to make practical use of what he had learned so far—

"To destroy the capital and kill all of its inhabitants — hey hey, ho —"

Mare threw his tightly clenched fists upward.

The Hanzos hiding behind him raised their fists as well.

•

Climb stood in the hallway, observing the scenery outside through the overly thick glass windows.

Renner had told him that she would be busy putting on makeup now so that she would not embarrass herself in case the Sorcerer Kingdom's army arrived before she could meet with her father, which was why he was shooed out of the room. She also informed Climb that she might even change out of the outfit she had on, naturally it was going to take quite a while.

He looked back down the corridor, the empty, lifeless, and silent corridor.

The knights who stayed in the palace till the end were all preparing to face the Sorcerer Kingdom's army head-on. They had left their posts and gathered together to block off the entrance to the palace.

Some might scoff at them for what seemed like meaningless resistance.

Unlike the band of warriors led by Gazef Stronoff, most of these knights were merely a smidge stronger than the average soldier. If they were to fight the monsters of the Sorcerer Kingdom, they would probably be destroyed as easily

as it would be for someone to break the branches of a dead tree. Yet, as men who had been knighted by royalty, they wished to display their loyalty till the very end. They had deployed themselves without complaint. The truly pathetic ones would be those who would dare mock them.

If he was being honest, due to past experiences, Climb did not have much goodwill for the vast majority of knights. He had always thought that should a life-or-death situation arise, they would run away like chickens. Climb could not help but mock his own closed-mindedness.

It was precisely because their loyalty to the royalty was true and without fault that they could not accept a street rat serving this close to a royal.

Climb had made a severe misjudgment of their loyalty to the throne.

He looked towards the direction of the entrance.

Should he not be fighting side-by-side with the knights? Climb mulled it over and concluded that he should not.

Back then, he was not saved by the royalty. The one who saved him, was Renner herself.

If Renner ordered him to do so, he would join the knights without hesitation. However, since she had given no such order, he should stay by her side. If he could buy even a single second to die before Renner, it would be his duty, his all.

His life and soul have long been Renner's, ever since she had saved him.

In this silent, empty hallway, Climb pondered about all sorts of things.

He thought about his life up to this point, about Renner, about their hypothetical future, and—

Climb looked around him. Of course, no one was there. The one who had served next to him, Brain Unglaus, had long since left the palace.

He did not know where Brain had gone.

If the Sorcerer Kingdom's army had made its way to the castle, he was probably already dead.

Climb mourned deep down.

Brain was like a mentor, a friend, and a brother to him. He had taught Climb a lot of things and had guided him for quite a while.

Compared to Gazef, Climb had gotten much closer to Brain. To Climb, who held Renner as the most important person in his heart, Brain was someone who came a close second.

"Why did things end up this way..."

Climb's whisper dissipated in this lifeless corridor.

But how did things actually turn out this way?

Climb had thought that their peace would have lasted, that things would be the same tomorrow as it would the day after tomorrow. However, looking at it now — suddenly, the doors to the room were slammed open. A loud *bang* rang out.

Because the sound was more brutal than he would have ever imagined, Climb hurriedly looked towards the door to see Renner by the door side. She did not change her outfit, only a slight hint of red was on her face, light enough that he could not tell if she put on makeup at all.

She had spent so much time in there but her appearance was no different compared to the usual.

In her hands was Razor Edge, still in its sheath.

Did something happen? Just as Climb was about to ask, Renner spoke.

"Climb, let's hurry now."

"Yes!"

Renner said that phrase and ran along the corridor.

Climb followed and asked.

"Did something happen?"

Renner stole a glance at him and looked back towards the front.

"Yes. I remembered something that had to be done. A mini-revenge against the Sorcerer Kingdom if you will. That is why we must hurry to where my dear father is. We have to check if he is still in his room first!"

Along the way, Renner passed over Razor Edge to him. He followed her orders and moved towards the king's room.

Of course, there were no knights there too.

Renner did not intend to dampen her momentum, as she slammed open the doors to this room too.

Inside was Ramposa III, shocked.

"Renner. What in the..."

After so much noise, it turned out that it was his own daughter. He must have thought that someone else had broken in. Ramposa III stopped talking halfway through his sentence.

Climb felt that the king's gaze had shifted from Renner to him, so he took a massive bow as an apology.

"Ah, father, you are still here! I just remembered something really important."

Renner immediately spoke.

She had run her way here, yet her breath remained calm and steady. Climb was the same, but he was still curious as to how Renner, who he had rarely seen running, had the same level of stamina as him. Still, she had not run that fast, so it was probably nothing to worry about. Climb quickly killed that thought.

"Renner, what happened? Also, why did you open the door like that?"

"I feel like these things do not really matter as much right now."

Renner spoke a bit faster than she normally would, causing Ramposa III to smile wryly.

"...Well, you do have a fair point. So, Renner, what is wrong? You mentioned that there was something important just now?"

"Yes! So basically—" Renner tilted her head in an adorable manner before she continued, "Father, why are you here?"

"I was locked in here by that child, did you not know about this?"

"Yes, it was Onii-sama."

"Haaaah, Zanac was an idiot to say that the two of you will go before I do. That child..."

Ramposa III's expression was full of sorrow. Everyone knew at this point that of the army they sent from the capital a week ago, none had returned. Though none of them knew of their fate, it was not too difficult to imagine the reason why they had not returned.

"...And then yesterday, when I was finally released, I thought that we must make preparations before the Sorcerer King arrived. That is why I am still preparing here in my lonesome. The knights offered to help but I sent them all away. I wonder where they have escaped to..."

Climb could not bring himself to tell him that the knights were at the entrance, preparing for a last stand. Renner appeared to be the same.

"Speaking of preparations, you meant those?"

"Indeed, those."

In the direction those two looked towards, were treasures such as the crown and many books.

"...So, why Renner, why are you still here? Did that child... not let you escape?"

"That — Is it not the same for father?"

"I will not run. That child was just a prince. I was meant to be the one to shoulder that responsibility. Yet, that child... hmmm? Is that sword not..."

Ramposa III noticed the sword by Climb's waist. He looked towards Climb's back and then back towards Renner.

“The one who served you… the warrior who could rival Gazef, what happened to him?”

“Brain-san had left this place to do battle with His Majesty the Sorcerer King.”

“…While I do not believe that he could defeat the Sorcerer King, he should have brought it along even more so than ever. Why, why did he not take that sword with him? Perhaps, with that sword, he could…”

“I do not feel like… it would be possible. After all, that is an opponent not even the Warrior-Captain could defeat. Things have evolved into the way they are already, so even if the Sorcerer King were to be defeated, nothing would fundamentally change.”

“Is that so… indeed. That is true. If we could not push the Sorcerer Kingdom’s army back, everything else would just be meaningless.”

Ramposa III suddenly looked out the window and continued.

“As to why I am still here. I believe that I have the duty to pass on the history of our royal lineage to our conqueror. I must, as the last king, demonstrate to them our dignity.”

Ramposa III laughed as if he was tired. Well no, he was probably tired in actuality.

“—Climb. Such is the duty of a king. Take Renner and run. Although it might already be too late, the palace does have hidden passageways out of the capital. The moment the Sorcerer Kingdom’s army makes its way into the palace, make use of those passageways.”

“—There is no need for that, Climb.”

Until now, the King’s order and Renner’s had never conflicted with one another. This time was different.

Climb thought about it for a moment, and did nothing. He just clenched his fists tightly together.

Indeed, Climb did not wish to leave Renner to die, but following Renner’s orders was more important to him. In any case, if he really wanted to obey this order, he would have let Evileye take her back then.

“—Climb!”

“—Climb.”

After seeing that Climb had not moved, both of them called out his name. The emotions imbued within their voices however, were completely different.

“Father, Climb is mine. He will not listen to your orders.”

“Indeed… it appears to be so… but, Climb… if you truly are loyal, I believe that

you should escape with this child. Do it, even if it only allows for the Vaiself bloodline to be passed on for longer. If you escape with this child, as your reward, you may have her hand in marriage."

Climb's eyes widened.

This suggestion was really alluring to him, causing his heart to falter. To say that he had not fantasized about doing this would be a lie. He had even frequently thought about Renner while "comforting" himself.

But, he decided that his fate would be to die as Renner's shield.

"While the reward is certainly tantalizing... but it is far too valuable for me to accept... so do allow me to refuse your offer..."

As Climb spoke, he felt like he was throwing up blood.

He stole a glance at Renner, to see an incredible smile on her face. Surely it was out of praise for his loyalty.

"...Now then, it is my turn to say why I had rushed here... Father. Please leave the crown to me."

"Why?"

"I believe that we should not just hand over the crown, a treasure that carries with it our family's history, to His Majesty the Sorcerer King directly."

"...He is the man who destroyed this country, so the symbolic gesture of passing on the crown must be done. Also, if things such as the crown continue to be passed down, the history of our family will be preserved. That was my line of thought, which was why I had retrieved these from the treasury."

"I think these items should all be hidden in the city. Then, we could say to the Sorcerer King, 'the items that signify kingship were all hidden inside the city, so if you destroy the capital, you risk losing them all.'"

"...I see. Perhaps this would... be a good plan. Perhaps the acquisition of the crown and the destruction of the capital will become a dilemma for him. Although my life will not be spared, if this could help the people, even if by a little, it shall be done."

Ramposa III took the crown off his head.

"Father, not only that one, but the other one too. I believe that the crown used for the coronation ceremony warrants priority in hiding."

"Ah, indeed. That is true."

"Also the other items father had brought over. The staff, the jewels used for coronation, and the national seal. Could you leave everything that is symbolic of the throne and the Kingdom to me? After all, the more cards we could play from

our hand, the better."

"...Mmmm. Of course, that is fine."

"Then, Climb. Could I trouble you to hide these items?"

"Of course, Renner-sama. But, where should I hide them?"

"Yes. I had discussed this with Onii-sama way back then."

"What? With Zanac?"

"Yes, father. I actually got this idea from Onii-sama. The procedure for hiding these items had been planned out already. However, because he might have gotten the idea from Marquis Raeven, I felt uneasy about it..."

"Really? That child had thought this far ahead?" Ramposa III's voice trailed as he muttered to himself. His eyes appeared to have moistened a little.

"So, Climb. There was this warehouse district that had been abandoned because of Jaldabaoth's attack. There is a small warehouse there."

While Renner had explained in detail, her instructions were complicated enough that Climb did not trust himself to find it.

Renner walked around Ramposa III to use the table to draw an easy-to-understand map on a piece of paper. It was a simple one, but now he would not have to worry about getting lost.

"Here is a hidden basement here. Please hide the items inside there."

"Yes! I will abide by your order!"

"After you are done with this—"

Climb stared intently at Renner's face, hoping that she would not say something like, "Do not come back." *Please let me stay by your side until the very end.* Had his thoughts reached her? Renner spoke after a prolonged moment of hesitation.

"Please do — return safely."

While they were not certain where the Sorcerer Kingdom's army had reached, it was highly likely that they had already broken into the capital and were crawling all over the place. In that case, to leave this place was extremely risky. However, Climb would not hesitate. Since his master had ordered it, he must do as he was told.

"Yes!"

"You must return unharmed. Do not try to fight. If you see an enemy, run with all of your might. Do you understand?"

It felt like she understood his resolve but could not place much faith in his capabilities. Renner repeated herself again.

“Yes!”

Climb nodded his head heavily. At that point, it looked like Renner was finally relieved.

“—Good. Now then, father. Given the current situation, it would be hard for him to make it out of the palace... so could you tell Climb?”

“You wish for me to reveal the hidden passageways from the palace to the capital, correct?”

“Yes.”

“I understand. Let me tell him.”

After hearing the king’s explanation, Climb was truly shocked. He had walked through that tunnel multiple times yet had never detected the presence of those hidden pathways.

“Climb, it is fine even if you return a bit late. Could you remain cautious and not let these items fall into enemy hands?”

“Of course, Renner-sama! I will complete my mission even if it is the last thing I do!”

“After you have hidden the items, even if something worrying came up, do return here as fast as possible no matter the cost. Given the current situation, we do not know when the Sorcerer Kingdom’s army would arrive.”

While that sentence’s structure was a bit different, she was probably just repeating herself to drill that idea into him. That showed how much she cared for him.

So Climb, one to do anything to even ease her mind a little bit, straightened himself and positively responded.

“Of course! I will run back with all my might.”

“—Good, I will leave that to you then.”

Renner smiled just as she normally would. Before Climb stepped out of the room, he noticed that Ramposa III had passed a few potions to Renner.

One could imagine what those were.

Climb lowered his head and exited the room. He ran towards the hidden passageways.

Afterwards, he used those passageways to enter the capital.

It felt surreal. It was as though every inhabitant of the capital had disappeared. That was how silent it was.

It was then when he heard the roar of some giant beast, but from his current position he could not figure out what that was. The capital was vast, if he did not

have the vantage point of the castle or the city walls, it would be difficult for him to figure out what was going on.

However, to the current Climb, that was not necessary. All he had to do was run full speed towards the warehouse.

He did not run into anybody before he reached his destination.

This was an urgent manner, but this place was quite far away. In addition to how cautious he had been on his way here, he had spent quite a bit of time on the road.

The warehouse was not as big as he had imagined. Climb got near the door and noticed that it was not locked.

He returned the bell he had prepared back into his bag and snuck in.

Nothing was stored in this warehouse, it was empty.

The smell of dust carpeted his face. There were no light fixtures and the windows were shut, so it was terribly dark inside. There were however, rays of light that fell through some cracks, so it was not entirely dark.

Climb walked through the entrance and held his breath. He concentrated on the sounds that came from the outside.

He confirmed that there were not any sounds coming towards the warehouse and walked towards the wall opposite to him as he had been instructed to.

There were many empty shelves there. He found the third shelf from the right and forcefully pushed it. At first, nothing happened, but after he applied more force gradually, a click could be heard. The shelf no longer resisted his push and swung open like a door.

It was totally dark inside, a room without windows.

Climb put on his helmet.

With its power, he could make out his surroundings. In the empty room, on the floor, was a handle-like protrusion. Upon raising that handle, a spiral staircase downwards was revealed.

At the bottom of the short staircase was a small room with a single shelf.

It was equally empty as the rest, nothing of substance was on it. The dust that had built up in the room formed a thick layer that covered everything. He placed the royal treasures there.

After that, his mission was complete.

Climb returned to the surface and exited the warehouse.

He had to run back at full speed now.

He looked back towards the castle and could not help but mutter, “heh?”

The castle was snow white. Thick walls surrounded the castle, but they were painted white too. Light shone on it reflected off brilliantly.

To a third-party, it must have been a beautiful sight, but as one of its residents, this was an urgent situation—

"Ah! G-great, you weren't squished... umm... it would be dangerous for you to stay here you know?"

He heard a child's voice next to him.

He looked towards where the voice came from. Atop the warehouse was a girl who was looking down at him. In her hands was a black staff. Her skin tone was dark, she was probably of the race known as Dark Elves.

"You are...?"

"...Eh, um, umm, ummm. This place is scheduled for demolition... so, umm, because you might get caught up in it, it would be better for you to leave here quickly okay?"

Now that she had said that, he understood.

This girl was undoubtedly from the Sorcerer Kingdom.

His hands, reaching to unsheathe his sword, stopped itself.

While she did not appear to be strong, it would not be possible for her to have made her way here alone. It would be dangerous to treat her as a simple girl.

Although he might win this fight, if he were to cause a disturbance here and cause the Sorcerer Kingdom's undead to gather around, he would not be able to return to Renner's side. His duty was not to defeat the enemy, but to serve by her side.

Plus, had Renner not repeatedly warned him about this?

He wanted to look back at the warehouse but managed to quell the urge. Since he could not kill her to silence her, he should try his best not to rouse her suspicion.

Climb turned his back on the girl and ran. Compared to his fear of receiving an attack from the rear, his desire to return to Renner as soon as possible was much stronger.

Climb began to run. The moment he turned a corner, he heard the sound of buildings collapsing. He had to kill the urge to check what was going on.

The attack he was watching out for never happened. Climb arrived safely at the entrance to the passageways. While he checked if he was being followed, Climb noticed the plumes of smoke rising up to the skies.

"...The capital is on fire?"

Because of the houses blocking his line of sight, he could not confirm where the smoke was coming from, but he was certain that it was from more than a couple of sources.

So that girl was not part of the vanguard, but a sizable contingent of the Sorcerer Kingdom's army had already made their way in and were pillaging the city.

So why could he not hear any screams—

Climb ignored the questions that arose in him.

He did not have time to waste on these questions. He had to return to Renner's side and report that he had completed his mission. After that, he could remain by her side until the end.

Climb ran through the passageway and returned to the palace.

Inside the palace, it was quiet and calm. He could not understand why.

Previously, the castle appeared to have frozen over. That was undeniably the result of some form of attack by the Sorcerer Kingdom. If that was the case, while there might not be many left, there should still be a few knights remaining to defend the place.

Even though this place was far away from the knights' defensive lines, he should still be able to hear some sort of noise, even if it was just the sound of a sword clashing against something. Speaking of which—

It's even quieter than before.

Compared to before, the silence became even more uncomfortable. Never mind the palace, the loneliness he felt right now was like if he was the last man in this world.

Climb intentionally ran with heavier steps to make more noise as he made his way to the king's room. Perhaps he should have followed protocol in how he opened the door, but Climb did not care anymore. He opened the door with all his might.

No one was there.

He looked around. He could neither find Renner nor Ramposa III.

The king's room was connected to another room, perhaps they were there. Just as Climb was about to cross the threshold, he noticed that there was a piece of paper on the table.

It was the same type of paper Renner had used to draw the map.

He picked it up and looked at it.

It was Renner's familiar handwriting, instructions for him to go to the throne

room.

The next moment, Climb had run out of the room.

As Climb got close to the throne room, he slowed down. The corridor to the throne room was filled with multiple figures on both sides. None of which he had seen before in the palace.

Their faces were pale white — women who could not possibly be human.

They had to be the Sorcerer King's subordinates. They did not seem to be antagonizing Climb, who had run at them. Well no, it was more like they were not interested in him at all.

Should he unsheathe, or should he not?

Climb could not make up his mind. One of the women spoke.

"Please enter, last human of this court."

After she said that, she shut her mouth in a disinterested manner.

He had a bad feeling about what she had said, a chill was sent down Climb's spine.

Climb ran between the women towards the throne room.

In the subsequent moment, so much information flooded his brain that he had a sensory overload.

Sat upon the throne was not Ramposa III, but a skeletal monster that radiated overwhelming pressure — the Sorcerer King Ainz Ooal Gown. To his left and right was a man with a long tail, the Prime Minister of the Sorcerer Kingdom, Albedo, and an insectoid monster that looked like it was made out of ice.

Not far from them, lifeless and on the floor, was Ramposa III. His clothes were stained dark red and next to him sat Renner, her clothes soaked in blood. On the ground, close by, was Razor Edge.

The blade of the sword was coated with blood. There was no mistaking it, this was the weapon used to kill Ramposa III.

"Princess!"

"Climb!"

"Hoh," someone else laughed. A mocking laugh, probably.

Climb stood between Renner and them and readied his sword. Both of them will probably die right here. To protect Renner till the end in spite of that fact was Climb's ultimate demonstration of loyalty.

"In front of Ainz-sama, your head is raised too high. 『Kneel.』"

Climb immediately kneeled. He could not resist at all. It was more accurate to say that before he had noticed, his body had already adopted this posture. He

noticed the one behind him had done the same.

Renner.

The image of Renner being mind-controlled flashed through his mind and everything began to click together.

"You controlled — controlled Renner-sama like this?!"

The tragedy in front of the throne: Renner was controlled and forced to kill her own father. His anger boiled over yet he still could not move. It was as though this body was no longer his.

"Ahhh, I remember. I have met with him during my duel with Gazef Stronoff. Undo the [Command Mantra]."

"Yes! 『You are free.』"

With the mental restraints removed, Climb jumped sideways to pick up Razor Edge, which was on the ground. He stood up rapidly, adjusted his breath, and adopted a stance. His opponent was the Sorcerer King.

Of course, this was meaningless against the opponent who was able to kill the Warrior-Captain at such a speed that he could not follow his movements with his eyes at all. Still, he was Renner's meatshield. What good would he be if he did not stand between them?

The Sorcerer King got up from the throne and walked leisurely towards Climb.

"You should be grateful that a king, such as I, would be willing to personally duel with you. Ah yes... if I win, I shall be taking that sword."

The Sorcerer King walked towards him without a care, he was not on guard for him at all.

Anger occupied Climb's body and mind.

This was all his fault.

If he did not exist, peace would be the status quo, no one would have died—

"—The Princess would not have had to experience this sorrow!"

The Sorcerer King looked like he was sneering at him.

A slash would not be able to reach him. He thought about how the Warrior-Captain was slain. What was his best move?

He held on tight to Razor Edge—

The Sorcerer King took a step and at that moment, Climb threw Razor Edge with all of his strength.

It looked like not even the Sorcerer King had expected this.

As Climb threw the sword, the Sorcerer King lost his balance.

Climb closed the distance between them, clenched his fist, and punched him.

His fist was aimed at the Sorcerer King's face.

"Climb!"

He heard Renner mournfully call out his name.

Skeleton-type monsters being weak to bludgeoning damage was a well-known fact, yet he felt intense pain once his fist connected.

The Sorcerer King on the other hand, did not appear to be affected by it at all.

"If this was a fairy tale—"

The Sorcerer King extended his hand at an unbelievable speed to grab on to Climb's breastplate. He tried to escape, but he could not even pry his hand open.

"—passion would awake dormant power, to grant you the ability to defeat me."

The Sorcerer King picked Climb up. His resistance did not have any effect, as if he were struggling against a sturdy wall.

"But — this is reality. Nothing so perfect would happen."

He was thrown. Climb's body flew through the air for quite a while before falling to the ground.

The impact of his back hitting the floor knocked the air out of him.

Climb stood up in panic and looked at the Sorcerer King. After tossing Climb, he did not take another step. He did not seem to have considered making a follow-up attack.

This was the arrogance afforded to him by his overwhelming strength.

"You will die here... you are not worth saving. You, who are without talent or ability, do not deserve salvation. However, do not despair."

The Sorcerer King appeared to be looking at Climb, but also not at the same time. His eyes appeared to be looking somewhere far away.

"This world is unequal. The inequality you experience started the moment you were born. The birth of those with talent implies, of course, that there are those born without talent. Furthermore, the environment one was born into differs. A rich family versus a poor family, even the personality of your fellow brothers and sisters matters. Those who were lucky go on to lead fulfilling lives, but those who were not, do not. However, I must reiterate; do not despair at such inequalities. The reason for this — is because death is the equalizer gifted to all. That is to say — I am. Only the mercy bestowed upon all by me, the ruler of death, can be regarded as absolute equality in this world so riddled with inequalities."

Climb could not understand what he was talking about at all, he was probably telling him to rest in peace the long way round.

He could not help but be overwhelmed by his presence.

He is death, a being no living thing could oppose. It was as though Climb was about to be swallowed up by the Sorcerer King's pride alone.

The difference between them, on a biological level, was too great.

Of course, the Sorcerer King, head of a state and one who wielded magic that could easily destroy an army, was entirely different compared to the talentless warrior that was Climb. However, the difference between them was not just so.

It was like that of an ant, yearning for the skies. That, was the difference between their domains.

Even so — even though he knew full well that he could not win, he had made his resolve to give his all, to be Renner's meatshield till the end of the very end.

Courage surged through him.

His languished heart burned once more.

Yes!

All of this was for Renner.

For the woman who had saved him on that rainy day.

For her, who saw him as human—

"...I see. Those are the eyes."

The Sorcerer King said something strange.

He must have sensed Climb's intent to battle. The Sorcerer King exposed his defenseless back towards Climb, picked up Razor Edge which laid on the ground, and tossed it towards him.

"Rise up."

The Sorcerer King extended one hand and in an instant, a jet-black sword appeared. The length of the blade was around that of a longsword.

Climb stared at the Sorcerer King without raising his guard while he picked up Razor Edge. To have left openings in this moment could not have been helped. He thought about Gazef's duel. Right before the fight began, the Sorcerer King had said himself that weapons without adequate enchantments could not damage him, but also that this sword could kill him.

Even this set — this set of armor granted to him by Renner, which had multiple enchantments imbued on it, could not break his defense. This was a depressing fact, one he had confirmed in that strike.

"Climb..."

To Renner, who leaned towards him with worry in her eyes, Climb smiled and whispered.

“Princess, I will buy you some time. If... you wish, please do it sooner than later.”

His thoughts were conveyed as Renner nodded her head.

Climb created some distance between him and Renner before he raised Razor Edge.

“Have you bid your farewells?”

“I wish to ask. After you kill me, will you kill the Princess too?”

The Sorcerer King remained silent.

Climb could not help but find that odd.

This was not an occasion to be silent. What answered his question was a “Hehe” from the Sorcerer King, a soft laughter.

“How shall I torment you...? The best way would be to not answer your question.”

“Sorcerer King!”

He swung Razor Edge, which was easily caught by the Sorcerer King’s sword. After multiple strikes, the Sorcerer King remained standing where he stood.

The Sorcerer King did not attack him; he was playing with him instead, like someone would do to entertain a child.

However, this was fine by him.

He raised Razor Edge up high and bet everything in this single strike.

As before, the Sorcerer King parried his attack with that sword of pure black.

This was the moment.

To bet everything he had.

Climb activated his martial arts. Not only that, but he had also activated the ring’s ability too. At that moment, Climb’s combat prowess surged significantly.

In that case — because the Sorcerer King had gotten used to his usual movements, this strike was more like an ambush.

He pretended to use all of his strength to swing the sword down, relaxed his muscles, and pulled the sword back with all his might the moment it was blocked. In a single stroke, he thrust it towards the red orb in the Sorcerer King’s stomach.

He had been thinking for a while now:

That was probably the Sorcerer King’s weak spot.

Even if it was not, if he managed to break it, would that not also count as a

form of revenge?

"—Oooof!"

"—I see, an impressive attack."

The attack he had put all of his strength into, was caught dead in its tracks by the Sorcerer King with a single hand.

Climb felt his shoulder burn, a moist sensation began expanding from it, and in the next moment, the heat turned into intense pain.

He jumped back immediately, knowing that his shoulder had been slashed.

The armor given to him by Renner was cleaved through this easily by the Sorcerer King's blade. That said, it did not appear to have weapon destruction abilities, because the armor itself did not break.

He could still move his arm, but the problem was that he could no longer do the same attack he just did.

The thought that he could avenge those who had fallen was but a mere dream.

"Could Razor Edge break a World Class Item? I am very interested in the results of such an experiment. If it could damage one, that sword's value would skyrocket. That said—" the Sorcerer King threw his sword and it disappeared mid-air, "—I can afford to wait until after I kill you to run those experiments."

It looked like the Sorcerer King was about to cast magic.

Climb laughed. The Sorcerer King chose to use magic against someone like him, so he could not allow his opponent enough time to cast.

Climb leapt. As he heard the words "[Grasp Heart]," he felt intense pain, as if his body was being ripped apart from the inside.

"Outstanding."

And then—

His vision—

Really—

Meant—

•

"I shall excuse myself then, woof."

He heard an unfamiliar voice by his side followed by the sound of doors being shut. It woke him right up, like a trigger being activated.

Something should have happened, but everything felt like it had withered

away. He felt something akin to the feeling of forgetting a dream in the morning.

Climb felt like his muscles and bones had melted as he could not summon any strength at all. Even the simple act of twisting his neck was a struggle.

He tried his best to survey his surroundings.

The most luxurious room Climb had seen so far in his life had been Renner's, but this far surpassed hers in opulence. He had something of a photographic memory, yet he could not recall ever seeing this room in the palace.

What had happened to him?

Why... was he still alive?

Also — what happened to his master?

Although he could not move his body well, he could feel the presence of someone else in the room.

"Aaaa..."

He tried to call out to them, but the sounds that came out of him could not constitute speech. Still, the person in the room had understood him as they hurriedly rushed over.

"Climb! You woke up!"

He still could not vocalize, but that was to be expected. His entire body was without strength, so not even his vocal cords could move. Yet that was not the reason why he did not speak, it was because of the flurry of emotions that occupied his mind.

His eyes were filled with tears.

That was right, this was all a nightmare.

The Kingdom being attacked by the Sorcerer Kingdom and how Renner had been forced to make her resolve to die had all just been a nightmare.

"Aaa, saa..."

"Uhmm, yes. I am Renner. Climb."

The same smile as usual.

No, she was at the edge of his sightline, yet he could still clearly tell that this was different from her usual smile.

Did something happen?

Climb moved his eyes to discover something bizarre on her back.

Black wings.

Like that of a bat's.

It flapped around, making *whap, whap* noises as it went along.

Even if it was manmade, it was way too realistic. In any case, he should stop

making up lies to comfort himself.

Perhaps she had realized the source of his confusion. Renner's expression became neutral.

"This thing... I was changed by the Sorcerer King's power. I am no longer a human — but a demon."

Climb's eyes widened.

"Saaaaaa..."

"What a tragedy, for me to have been the only one to have survived."

He wanted to tell her that what she said was not true, but he could not muster the strength to speak. He could only groan with "aa—" and "oo—" sounds.

Droplets of tears began to fall.

Renner gently wiped his tears away.

Climb trembled with emotions as he groaned. No matter how much she had changed on the outside, she was still Renner on the inside.

"So... you must be curious about why you are still alive, correct? Before I answer that question... Climb... are you willing to listen to something selfish that I have to say? I have been turned into a demon, so I will remain in this world forever. Living alone would be a terribly painful thing to do."

Renner looked towards him.

"Climb, are you willing to become a demon as well?"

He did not hesitate; he had decided long ago to give his all for Renner. Climb struggled against his immobile body to nod his head.

"Thank you... then allow me to answer your question. The truth is, I have already sworn fealty to His Majesty the Sorcerer King. That was the cost of your resurrection."

Climb widened his eyes once more.

"Do not let it weigh on your heart. I did not believe that this was a bad deal. After all, I would not have to live on my own... Climb, are you willing to swear fealty to His Majesty the Sorcerer King too?"

"Ye...ss!"

While he was still a bit confused, if Renner was willing to swear fealty for his sake, he should choose to serve too. No, it was more accurate to say that this was the only option he had.

"Thank you, Climb. After you swear fealty to His Majesty the Sorcerer King, he would most definitely force some tasks onto you to test your loyalty. It will probably be painful for you, and that saddens me a lot..."

“That… won’t… be the… case.”

“…Thank you… Climb, that is all I have to say for now. Take a rest, I will take good care of you.”

She maintained her smile and disappeared from his view. From the direction where she went, he could hear the sound of doors opening followed by doors closing.

Climb relaxed.

Immediately afterwards, his desire to sleep took hold of him.

Climb, whose face was covered in tears, lost his consciousness as though he had just sunk into mud. The emotions behind those tears were too complicated for him to explain. Not even Climb himself knew why he cried.

•

Renner left the bedroom and walked towards the neighboring room. Upon noticing the person on the sofa, she knelt down in panic.

“Albedo-sama,” Renner took a deep bow, “I could not thank our master in time, so I am terribly sorry for that. The preparation of the poison and the theatrics in the throne room, to have even troubled His Majesty the Sorcerer King to personally go there to help, I am deeply grateful for that.”

“Fufu. That is enough. There is no need to worry over these things. *If* it was for outstanding individuals, such trivialities are well worth the time.”

“Thank you very much, Albedo-sama.”

The “if” part of that sentence was somewhat stressed more than the others, causing Renner to shudder. She did not know if they had seen through her even in this aspect. Albedo did not continue, but she felt her gaze on the back of her head.

“…Fufu. There is no need to be this tense around me. Demiurge and I have a full grasp on your capabilities through this event with the Kingdom.”

Back then, from the moment she had met with the demon Demiurge to the destruction of the Kingdom, around 90% of the plan had been suggested by Renner herself. She had expertly manipulated all sides through their conceit. The only thing she was wary of, was when the plan had changed to the slaughter of almost all citizens of the Kingdom. She was worried about whether or not she would be thrown away afterwards. Other than that, things had gone mostly

according to her plans.

"Such exceptional abilities must be put to their full use in Nazarick — under my command."

"Naturally, Albedo-sama."

"Ainz-sama had high praise for you. I will not allow you to disappoint him."

Minor, she could only detect a minor difference, but Albedo's tone had changed somewhat.

Renner continued to act subserviently. In this situation, this was probably the smartest choice she could make.

"The reward for your service from now on, for the next millennia, will be given to you in advance."

The sound of something being placed on the table could be heard.

"The Fallen Seed I gave you before, this is another one of them. The next step would be to prepare the sacrifice. You may start after he recovers. While magic could speed up the recovery, based on your specifications we will not do such a thing."

"Thank you very much, Albedo-sama. Please do convey my thanks to His Majesty the Sorcerer King as well."

"Renner. I will reiterate... do not disappoint me. This was not given to you because you have inherent value as a hostage, but something you had earned through your actions and the trust that had been built up between us. Do you understand?"

Upon hearing her gentle yet frigid voice, Renner bowed her head even lower than before.

"...Yes, Albedo-sama. To repay your generosity, your servant I will maintain, no, I will strive to serve you better than I have."

Her superior left behind a soft laugh as she stood up and left.

Renner kept her head down until she heard the sound of the door being closed. She breathed a huge sigh of relief. Mixed in her breath were lingering sensations of fear.

She had overcome the final hurdle.

The other party was a ruthless demon after all, it would not have been strange for her to have said that all of this was to raise her hopes up only to dash it at the last moment. Yet nothing of that sort happened. The weight on her shoulders was finally lifted, but she could not allow herself to believe for a single moment that her position was absolutely safe and secure.

For her to have gained their trust — was impossible. The best-case scenario was that they believed her to be valuable as a pawn, one worthy of their favor. That was why Renner had to contribute as much as she could. If she could not prove herself worthy of their grace, things would go south fast.

This was the home of those monsters after all, they knew full well that she was absolutely powerless here no matter how hard she tried. Yet, not even that was enough for them.

For that reason, Renner had to expose her weaknesses to them, the more the better. She had essentially handed over the other end of the leash to them to tell them that she was a loyal pet and that they were her masters. She had to make the superior-inferior relationship between them as clear-cut as possible. If she had not done so, they would probably not even bother to feign trust in her.

That was why they had put on such a show in the throne room.

Climb was Renner's biggest weakness — to show how important he was to her, she had spoken of him in the first conversation she had with Albedo — only when this truth was presented in front of these monsters, would she have truly put on the collar.

Climb's value as their hostage had to be realized, but she had a separate reason for it too. However, it appeared as though she had been seen through, but since things had turned out better than she had expected, it was not much of an issue.

There was something else that not even Renner could foresee.

She did not imagine that the Sorcerer King would act out that character himself.

What a terrifying Supreme Being.

Every time Renner thought about the being named Ainz Ooal Gown, she could not help but shudder all over.

It would have been more than enough for the Prime Minister Albedo to have acted that scene out, but the Sorcerer King would deign to essentially act the role of jester himself. This must have meant that he held quite a high opinion of her. "That is to say, the sovereign of a nation had gone out of his way to cooperate with your boring play. Surely you understand what that means?" was probably what Albedo was implying through her statements.

Albedo must have been against that decision.

If someone she admired had to stoop to act upon a stage, it would displease her too. Which meant that her goodwill for Renner, the person responsible for him being on that stage, had probably dried up.

If His Majesty the Sorcerer King had intentionally gone against Albedo-sama to act out that scene, that would make things even worse for me. If they were to believe even for a split second that I was no longer of use to them, I would surely be disposed of...

She had planned to only demonstrate a portion of her abilities and hide her true capabilities for now, but now that the Sorcerer King had personally come to cooperate with her, she had been forced into a corner.

...His Majesty the Sorcerer King had probably already foreseen all of this. It appears that an exceptional superior would not necessarily be good news for their subordinates.

Despite all of that, Renner still smiled.

Her dream of the past was minuscule. It only grew to how wondrous it was now because she had met them.

How lucky was she that she could realize such a dream through the simple betrayal and sacrifice of the Kingdom?

She wanted to dance.

She wanted to sing.

The joy in her heart was overflowing.

She was truly, truly overjoyed. Her brain felt like it could break from all of this happiness.

Demons were immortal. Being locked up in here meant that she had just found shelter in the safest place in the world.

If that was the case — Renner looked towards the door behind her. No, towards the young man sleeping on the bed inside.

"Climb. Stay here with me forever~ Let us exchange our first times today."

Renner almost melted as she spoke.

"Or should I treasure it more — and stop myself short of that today? This is the first time I have been met with such a dilemma — aaaah, such bliss!"



Epilogue

Epilogue

Elias Brandt Dale Raeven stepped off his carriage, only to find himself dumbfounded, frightfully staring at the scene in front of him.

Spread out in front of his eyes was a mountain of rubble.

It was hard for him to believe that this was the capital. It would have been more believable if someone had told him that this was all an illusion, but that was not the case. The scene in front of him was the truth, the conclusion of a battle.

Marquis Raeven's expression contorted at the sight of the tragedy in front of him.

How much manpower and time would have been necessary to ruin a city as large as the capital to this extent?

Either quantity would be unimaginable to him, the only one with the power to realize this was the Sorcerer King, who could only be described as inhuman.

The footsteps behind him got closer as a voice began to speak to him.

"Marquis..."

It was a noble from his own faction, one that had accompanied him on his way here. Although he was a mere baron, Marquis Raeven held his abilities in high regard. It was to the extent where he had planned to raise this man's title before anyone else.

For that reason alone, when asked by the Sorcerer King's subordinate which of the nobles were outstanding enough to spare, this man was the second person he named. Not even such a distinguished man could bring himself to speak, because he too could not hide his fear, and so they quivered. He must be experiencing the same emotions as Raeven himself upon witnessing the scene in front of them.

Marquis Raeven looked back and confirmed that all twelve nobles had descended from the ten carriages.

“Our audience awaits.”

No one objected and that was to be expected. They had been summoned to this place by the Sorcerer King so there was no way they would still be able to say things along the lines of “let’s not.” They could not even muster that much courage in the first place — no, it was more accurate to say that none of them were so foolhardy.

The problem now was, they had been told to come to the capital without a specified location.

Marquis Raeven looked around to discover a still-standing structure far away: the palace. The castle grounds, meant to serve as the palace’s defenses, had been rendered to rubble too.

The reason why Marquis Raeven could spot it from where they were was probably because they had cleared out the rubble around it on purpose.

A sole structure amid a mountain of rubble. Raeven had not given this proper thought beforehand, but this was no salvation. On the contrary, it had become an item that inspired an unspeakable and violent disgust in those who saw it.

“Let us proceed.”

Marquis Raeven’s entourage was currently at the ruins of what used to be the capital’s walls, so the palace was quite a distance away from them. While it might be faster for them to ride over, they had to avoid being seen in their carriages for fear of disrespect. They were there early for the scheduled time for their audience anyways, so they could make it there with plenty of time left even if they walked the entire way there.

Marquis Raeven stumbled around as he walked forward.

“Was this that street...?”

He heard someone behind him mutter.

The main street towards the palace was free of rubble. It was so clean that it was probably swept before this.

In other words, the only thing that remained intact here was the street. None of the houses nor the walls to the sides of the street remained. It seemed likely that they were demolished and then burnt clean. On their way to the capital they had seen villages and cities that were destroyed too, yet none of them matched the extent of destruction on display in the capital.

“Marquis, the capital’s inhabitants...”

“—Speak of this no more.”

They must have been worried about the safety of this city’s residents.

However, Raeven had not heard of them being relocated nor had he seen refugees outside of the capital. Given that was the case, there could be only one fate for them.

Marquis Raeven looked to the ruins to his sides. How many people were buried underneath? He even felt as though he was walking through a giant graveyard.

Raeven no longer used his nose to breath because he did not want to smell the pungent smell of corpses. But, miraculously, there was no such scent at all. The only smells that lingered in the air were the unbearable scent of burnt items and ashes.

They had walked for some time now but were still far away from the palace.

Were their hearts weakened by the sight of such tragedy? Raeven heard someone mumble.

"—Mad king."[20]

Marquis Raeven immediately turned around and yelled.

"You bastard!"

His sharp gaze circled around the nobles, of which there was one whose complexion was pale and whose face was constantly twitching.

Those who had lived long enough as nobility would have learned to subdue their emotions just to hide their expressions, yet the sight in front of him still made him yield internally.

He could empathize with them, but even if he concurred with that thought, they were *here*. It would not be advised to make an enemy out of *them*, so he had to vocally rebuke them.

"You all are phenomenal talents, that was why I chose to save you... so try to avoid squandering my efforts through such gaffes... There is no need to apologize to or thank me. Just please try to understand where I am coming from."

No responses, but he had faith that his intentions were well-conveyed.

"Marquis-sama. Umm, if we just walk without talking, our minds will naturally become occupied by depressing thoughts. How about we speak of some positive topics as we walk along?"

"...That is a good suggestion. Then... shall we talk about the birth of my second

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20. Refers to the Mad King Ashnard from *Fire Emblem: Path of Radiance*. Ashnard and Ainz are voiced by the same voice actor, Satoshi Hino (日野聡).

child?”

The nobles congratulated him in unison. In these past few miserable months, to Marquis Raeven, this was the only good news that triumphed over all. That was why he had spoken to them of this topic multiple times already.

He would praise his child for hours on end, but what he talked about was mostly without substance.

However, considering the fact that it could alleviate the mood a little, he still spoke of his child. When he snapped back to reality, they had already walked halfway on the long road to the palace.

Perhaps he might have said a bit — indeed, only a bit — too much.

Though he still had so much more to say, he knew it was time for him to stop. Raeven purposefully faked a cough.

Everyone who had tuned him out already tensed up at this.

“Well then, we shall speak more of my child when we return. What should we propose to the Sorcerer King so that our children may live happily in the future?”

They had discussed this topic many times before arriving here, but it was about time that they reached a conclusion.

Marquis Raeven surveyed their surroundings to confirm that there were no soldiers from the Sorcerer Kingdom around.

“While this is a question we must face straight on, His Majesty the Sorcerer King is undead after all. Unlike living beings like us, his rule will be everlasting. Will our grandchildren and great-grandchildren forget this scene and do something to enrage His Majesty?”

“That is highly likely. Though our grandchildren may do fine, those that come after them worry me.”

“After all, idiots could inherit the role of family head.”

“...Honestly, we do not have to take that much responsibility. If push comes to shove, why don’t we just allow them to perish? Grant them a quick death?”

A speech that would shock anyone who took pride in their noble bloodline, was made by a female lord whose family had only ascended to landed nobility during her father’s generation. She was here as a representative of her sick father.

Because it had come from someone whose roots in nobility did not run that deep, many had put on displeased expressions.

“Look at what is in front of you, things would not end with just one’s family being slaughtered.” Raeven’s words made her cast her gaze to the ground, “...So

that is why these are the only things we could do: Have this tragic scene drawn for posterity and tell our children of what happened here. We will have to beg His Majesty the Sorcerer King to preserve this scene."

"Were we not supposed to build a new city on these grounds?"

Raeven heard a question from his right, which was met with a rebuttal to his left.

"Rebuild this when it has been ruined to this state? Do you not find that a bit hard to imagine?"

Marquis Raeven agreed with the latter. However, the Sorcerer King possessed power that neither he nor the entire human race could muster. Perhaps he wished to build his ideal city from the ground up, and that was why he had done what he did.

But, if they lingered on this thought, they would get nowhere.

"Also, what about the hostage situation? Marquis?"

This was the topic he hated the most.

Raeven bit down on his lower lip.

They were not sure if the Sorcerer King would demand hostages from them, but, compared to the other party suggesting this, it would be more favorable for them to propose this idea. Marquis Raeven racked his brain and arrived at a conclusion.

"I will be the one to suggest the proposal to the Sorcerer King."

In other words, he was advocating that they actively hand over hostages. Many of the nobles probably disagreed with his decision in their hearts, but none of them spoke up nor changed expressions.

After they had made their final decisions on a number of subjects, the palace finally came into view.

What Raeven and the rest saw was a mountain of rubble that appeared to be blocking the entrance. Perched atop it was an undead being.

The undead was conversing with the Prime Minister of the Sorcerer Kingdom, Albedo. Perhaps they had detected their presence because they turned to face them.

There was still a bit of distance between them, but Raeven and his entourage began to sprint.

Once they got closer, they finally figured out the true form of the mountain of rubble the Sorcerer King sat on. Well, it would be incorrect to call it a "true form" because it was indeed a mountain of rubble, yet from a different point of

view it was not.

Placed on top of it was something radiant: the crown of the Kingdom.

That was a throne made of rubble, an art piece symbolizing the end of the Kingdom.

It was hard for them to imagine that the rubble that constituted this throne was from this city. Perhaps it had been transported over from some enviable place.

Terrifying.

A monster who was capable of conceiving such an idea and could also execute it as is, was terrifying.

They ran with all of their might and took a knee in front of him almost as if they had tripped over. “Hooo, hooo!” they heaved, terribly out of breath.

“We are here to pay our respects to Your Majesty the Sorcerer King.”

Marquis Raeven bowed and felt the Sorcerer King glance at the back of his head.

“Raeven, correct? You made it here just in time. That said, umm... how should I put this, regulate your breath first...? You have worked up quite a lot of sweat after all.”

“T-to have shown such a disgraceful sight to you, I must profusely apologize.”

His voice was laced with so much familiarity that it shocked him. That was exactly why he was terrifying.

His brain screamed the word “trap” to him. Their situation would only worsen if they kept up their unkemptness. Raeven pulled out a handkerchief to wipe the sweat from his forehead.

“...I summoned you all here after all, etiquette would dictate that I greet you first. However, I dislike meaningless chatter, so let us be prompt.”

“Understood!”

Was he about to speak to Raeven and the others about something they had not discussed before?

“My — the Sorcerer Kingdom’s army has destroyed the land of the nobles to the West and to the South of this city. They will be returning soon. You all should administer to your lands as usual. Although we might alter territorial designations in the future, we have not planned to do so yet — am I correct, Albedo?”

“Yes, it is just as Ainz-sama had surmised.”

“That is about it. From now on, Albedo will notify you of any important

changes we might make to your demesnes. You should follow the same laws you have been up to this point."

Not just Raeven, but the other nobles piped up to respond too.

"Do you have any questions or things that you are confused about?"

"None at all! It is just that, to prove mine and my fellow nobles' loyalty, your servant I would like to make a few proposals."

Marquis Raeven spoke as though he was coughing up blood. After he had said these words that gave him depression, he saw that the Sorcerer King had turned his head to look at something distant. He might be thinking something along the lines of "mere humans dare to speak to me other than to answer my questions? Such arrogance."

Had he displeased him? Raeven felt as though his stomach had been filled with lead. If he were about to be done with grueling work, only to have his subordinate add more documents to the pile, he would probably be making a similar expression to the one the Sorcerer King had on right now. Raeven thought about these things in a vain attempt to escape reality.

After what felt like an eternity had passed, the Sorcerer King lazily spoke, "Hmmm, is that so? Just speak to Albedo after this."

"That concludes this conversation then... Right, to allow people to realize how idiotic it would be to oppose me and my country, this place will be left in its current state. That said, if some plague were to be born from this, it would be quite troublesome. For that reason, we will be applying magic here after burning it through and through. To avoid getting caught up in that, remember not to allow anyone near here."

"Understood!"

"—Albedo, summon Guren here and burn it all to the ground. However, the palace's beautiful exterior must be preserved. Move the furniture and whatnot inside to E-Rantel."

"Understood."

Although he wanted to know who Guren was, it was probably something not meant for his ears. If he had to categorize things into "should know" and "should never find out," everything surrounding the Sorcerer King probably belonged to the latter.

"Now then, although the Kingdom had been utterly destroyed — Raeven, I must ask. The true extent of how moronic it would be to oppose me must be common knowledge by now, correct?"

"Yes... The fact of how foolish it would be to oppose Your Highness the mighty Sorcerer King will surely become common knowledge for eons to come."

Because his head was bowed, he could not tell what expression the Sorcerer King had — of course, the Sorcerer King did not have any skin and thus no expression to speak of — but, he could sense a hint of joy in his response.

"Is that so? Then what we have done here was worth it. I am rather satisfied because of that."

Hearing the opinions of the Sorcerer King, one who had slaughtered eight million of the Kingdom's people, gave Raeven an intense urge to vomit. He could not help but pray.

That one day a hero would slay this demon king.

•

"I did nothing wrong!"

Philip repeated the same phrase he had already repeated multiple times throughout this week.

Indeed, his actions definitely did not spark the war. This was all a ploy by the Sorcerer Kingdom. If he thought about it that way, everything would finally make logical sense.

He was used.

Perhaps the reason why his lands did not produce an abundant harvest and why his proposals were never implemented was because of the schemes of the Sorcerer Kingdom.

They must have either paid those guys off or spoke ill of me. I knew they did something against me. Of course, that had to be it!

Philip got off his bed and extended his hand towards the nightstand. He picked up the bottle on it and swirled it around, but he knew from the weight alone that it was free of water already.

"Pffft!"

Philip clicked his tongue and looked around his room.

Scattered all over the floor were empty bottles of liquor. Although the room might be filled with a strong scent of alcohol, Philip's nose had long adapted to it so he would not be able to tell the difference.

He randomly chose a bottle from the ground and held it to his lips, but not

even a single drop went down his throat.

"Fuck!"

He threw the bottle.

At the sound of the bottle shattering, he became even more frustrated.

"Oy! I'm out of booze!"

Even if he yelled, no one would serve him alcohol anymore. Usually there would be maids — Hilma's people — on standby in this room, but now that he thought about it, he felt like he had not seen her in a long time.

"Bring more booze!"

He yelled once more.

His body wobbled around. "Oww!" he winced as he supported himself on his bed. Rather than his drunkenness, his body was probably more sluggish due to the fact that he had not left this room for many days now.

Philip walked slowly to the door.

"Oy! Where the hell is everybody?!"

He yelled as he kicked the door violently. He did not use his fist out of fear that it could hurt.

No response. He clicked his tongue, opened the door, and yelled at the top of his lungs once more.

"Are you all deaf! I said I am out of booze! Bring more!"

Still no response.

Philip left the room in a rage.

The house was quiet.

His father and his older brother's family had all moved elsewhere because Philip wanted to make use of the main house. Only servants remained here other than him.

While it was a noble's mansion, it was only one befitting a mere baron. He could easily reach the dining room from his own room.

As he opened the door to the dining room, Philip's eyes widened.

That was because he had noticed a woman in white, sitting upon one of the chairs.

"Hoooh, are you awake now? You took so long that I was almost about to head over to get you myself."

That was the Prime Minister of the Sorcerer Kingdom, Albedo. Her smile remained unchanged from the first time he had met her. She did not appear to be mad at Philip for what he had done. Suddenly, the thought that the Sorcerer

Kingdom probably did not even give a damn about what he had done surfaced in Philip's mind.

Indeed.

If they were truly mad with him, they would have begun their invasion with Philip's demesne first. They had not done so however, so in other words, they were not mad at him. On the contrary, they should be grateful to him for giving them a reason to start a war with the Kingdom. Perhaps she was there to express their gratitude.

No, no. Maybe she had not found out yet. Maybe they did not know that it was Philip who did all of that.

Albedo's smile was infectious, causing Philip to smile at her too.

"T-Thank you for coming to such a wretched place, Albedo-sama. I cannot believe that you had to wait here! I will definitely scold those servants later."

Albedo was stunned for a moment, before smiling wryly.

"To have reached this extent is honestly impressive. I am somewhat in awe… fufu, I am here to finish what must be done, but before that, I have brought you a present. Do you wish to open it?"

Placed on top of the table was a white box at least fifty centimeters wide.

Philip regretted that he had stayed in bed for so long as he lifted the top of the box. A wonderful floral fragrance made his nose itch. With bated breath of what valuable item could be in this box, Philip opened it up and peeked inside.

It was Baron Delvin and Baron Rokerson's heads.

Had they experienced unbearable pain before they died? Their contorted expressions made him feel intense revulsion.

"—Eeeek!"

Albedo calmly spoke to Philip, whose body stiffened.

"To have the gall to besmirch me? We had planned to prepare an idiot, but never in my mind would I believe that someone as stupid as you could exist."

Woosh, that was the sound of Albedo standing up.

Her face was all smiles, but now that things had progressed to this point, even Philip knew.

She was absolutely furious.

If he did not escape this place, things would not end well for him.

Philip turned around to run, but in his panic his leg tripped over the other, causing him to fall to the ground with a loud *bang.*

Clop, clop, the sound of footsteps drew closer. She had already made her way

to him.

"Now then — let's go."

"No! No! I don't want to go!"

Putting up the minimal amount of resistance, he curled up into a ball.

"Do you seriously believe that acting like a spoiled child could get you out of this situation?"

He was pulled along by his ear, which sent pain to his brain so intense that he began to question if his ear was about to be torn off.

"It hurts! It hurts! Stop!"

"Then walk. Here, stand up."

Philip wanted to push Albedo's hand, which still held on to his ear, away. However, even though her hands were thin and delicate as expected of a woman, her grip strength was far stronger than his.

"It hurts! It hurts!"

He was pulled into a standing position by his ear.

His vision was blurred by his tears, yet Philip still punched towards Albedo's face. However, his fists were easily caught mid-air, and then—

"Hiyaaaaah!!"

A force strong enough to crush bones was applied to his fist, which began to make crunching sounds.

"...If you just walk, I will not crush your hands, how about that?"

"I got it! I got it! I will walk! Please don't do that again!" The force on his hand was lifted. "Why...? What have I done?"

Philip's sorrowful tears streamed down like a waterfall.

He had tried his best at everything, but not only was he not met with success, he had never been treated like this before.

Why was he victim to such violence?

Why had nobody come to help him? Had he been sold out to the Sorcerer Kingdom for others' safety?

They were all cowards.

The whole lot of them, cowards.

Albedo did not react to Philip crying for his fist and ear's sake. She just walked forward as if he did not exist at all. Philip followed along without resistance, since his ear was still in her hand.

They walked outdoors from the main entrance.

"—Eeeek!"

Philip shrieked at the sight in front of him.

A forest had popped up in front of the mansion.

But unlike a normal forest, this one was not made of grass and trees.

A large number of strangely shaped trees were there.

They were like stakes with hands and feet.

Impalement.

The villagers had all been impaled.

Men, women, old, or young were all impaled on stakes. Not a single one of them was spared.

All of them were impaled from the rectum to the mouth.

All of them told of their sufferings through their expressions, no exceptions. Blood spilt out from every orifice and puddles of blood formed at the base of the stakes.

When had they done something like this? It was impossible for Philip to not have noticed this going on.

"This... is not a dream. I used magic to soundproof your room. It must have been really silent, was it not? Haaah, if you were even a smidge smarter, you might have noticed something wrong... but from what I have seen, you were completely clueless up till now."

Philip tried to put all of his strength in his hands to release his ear from Albedo's grip again. Albedo reacted by punching his face as she said to him:

"I had considered letting the villagers execute you themselves, but that would be boring. That which I admire, Ainz-sama, had placed heavy emphasis on practical experience and training. That is why I wanted to test out some intel-gathering torture methods on you. You should be — of some use to me."

Upon seeing Albedo's expression, which was a smile that looked like it could tear her own face off, Philip lost consciousness.

"Haaah... this man, really...? Haaah, fine. After all, your father had requested me to, 'let that idiot taste everybody's pain!' I shall keep my promise to him."

Philip could no longer hear what she had said.

•

Since Albedo said she had to put an end to some matters, he was separated from her halfway back to this place. Ainz returned to his room alone and said in

a solemn tone to the maid in charge of taking care of him today.

"I will be reviewing the strategies the Sorcerer Kingdom should employ in the future. Stay here and do not allow anyone else past this point."

Ainz saw that the maid in charge of accompanying him had turned her gaze towards the side of the door to his room, towards the maid in charge of his room today. She was probably about to tell her, "I will leave everything here to you then, I shall be the one to wait on the venerable Ainz-sama." This was how they usually operated after all.

Ainz knew of this in advance, so he made a move before they could.

"I will have to consider things on the scale of years into the future. Any form of movement could disrupt my train of thought, do you understand?"

"Yes! I will try my best to completely erase my presence from now on!"

While Ainz wanted to say that he did not mean it in that way, was this not fine too? In all honesty, the more he thought about this, the less he wanted to think about it.

"Good. Well then, seeing as you could not erase your presence for now, you should just stay here."

"Yes, Ainz-sama."

The maid in charge of attending to him stayed behind in the office. Ainz himself made his way straight to his bedroom.

His body was fine, but his mind was absolutely tapped out. Ainz leapt into his bed as if he were diving into a pool.

The soft bed gently accepted his body.

A magnificent dive.

If one was to consider the hang time, the distance he had leapt, the location he landed on, the pose he was in when he landed, et cetera, his diving motion would garner him praise that was objectively well-deserved.

This was a skill he had gained through practice and experience because he had dove into his bed every time he was mentally exhausted.

"Haaaah!"

Ainz breathed a sigh of relief the same way a middle-aged man would. That sigh was beautiful too. A perfect thousand out of a thousand people surveyed would say that it was truly how a middle-aged man would sigh. The reason for this was the same as before, Ainz had practiced his sighs multiple times before too.

Ainz rolled around in his bed after that. Sometimes to the left, sometimes to

the right.

He had been at the ruined capital until now, so his body was covered in dust and dirt. While he knew that it would be best for him to take a slime bath first, he did not have the mental capacity for that anymore.

So tiring...

Was he successful in acting as a villain? Had he dealt with that fellow in the platinum armor correctly? Although there were multiple points that warranted consideration and review, they had finally sorted out a big issue.

—No.

This was just the first successful step in their grand scheme, one could say that things were only going to get more difficult for them from now on. With that said however, they had gotten the mindless destruction out of the way, one of the simpler parts of the plan. What was to come were destructions on a smaller scale, in other words, precision work. What was truly troublesome, was the rebuilding efforts that would come after that.

Up to this point, the Sorcerer Kingdom's territory had been tiny — excluding the Katze plains — yet it had giant nations as its vassals. However, things were different now. They had just gained a large amount of territory, the problems that could arise from this was obvious.

Of course, the one who had her hands full with internal affairs was Albedo, but if something serious was to arise, she would definitely consult Ainz on it. The problems that could occur in the future were sure to be even more critical and difficult than they were now. He had absolutely no faith in himself that he could resolve those issues appropriately at all.

Also, he could not figure out if he had messed up somewhere back then. Now, not only was there Albedo and Demiurge, the two geniuses of Nazarick around, that mentally compromised woman named Renner had also been added to Nazarick's ranks too. She had nothing to do with *Yggdrasil,* was purely an outsider, someone not bound by flavor text, and thus could analyze Ainz from a purely objective standpoint. What was more troubling was that her intellect was easily on par with the two geniuses of Nazarick.

Could he truly act out and act well the Ainz Ooal Gown he had been building up till now in front of someone like her?

"—I want to run away!"

This was the truth — the wholehearted truth from the depths of Ainz's soul.

Ainz spoke like a true salaryman who had committed a major error that would

probably be found out the next day he came in.

I thought I had reached my limits back then. Is it not time that I let everyone know that I was a talentless hack this entire time? Have I not mentally prepared myself for this way back?

But—

The moment I think about that moment approaching... I get scared of what kinds of reaction they would have... fuck. Would that not be enough to trigger the emotional suppression...?

It was as though Ainz's abilities were telling him that this was nothing to worry over at all.

Ainz pondered and pondered some more to arrive at a conclusion.

"—Alright, I'll run away."

However, that was easier said than done. There was no way that leaving everything behind to run away would be acceptable. It was like if he had not handed in the documents for his replacement yet wanted to use up all of his paid leave for a vacation a month before he resigned. That was definitely not an acceptable way to quit a job.

While he could just say, "alright, I'll run away" and actually run away, he would be looked down on for that.

He would need an appropriate reason for his absence.

Did he not have anything at all?

Ainz racked his non-existent brain.

Right!

An idea flashed in his mind.

He had considered multiple paid leave plans in the past, but they all went to waste. If that was the case — how about he set an example for them by taking a vacation first?

To be free from the shackles of Nazarick for even a little while, to hand over the work required to Albedo, would definitely be a safer bet than leaving the work to him.

But there was a chance that she would say that Ainz, as the supreme leader of Nazarick, had to be included in the planning process. If she said that...

"I already used the excuse that they should train to be self-sufficient should I pass away, so this could just be a variant of that. I'll tell them that should I become uncontactable, Albedo would be in charge of everything — that's the plan I'll run with."

Ainz clenched his fist.

It was just that—

Where should I go?

He could improve their relationship with the Empire and his with Jircniv by touring the Empire.

Or he could investigate the mountain chain that contained the Dwarven nation.

The Holy Kingdom—

—That's a no from me since there's nothing of value there anyways.

All sorts of dreams manifested in his mind as they grew more and more elaborate.

And then, Ainz was suddenly reminded of something.

How about I send those children away to make some Elf friends?

Aura and Mare. He had thought about this before, about whether or not he was pushing too much work onto them. Although this was well within the norm back in that world, Yamaiko had repeatedly ranted to him that their way of doing things was wrong. If that was the case, he should probably be more lenient to those children.

So, what should he do? Should he take those two on a tour?

That sounds nice... no, wouldn't that be an excellent plan? If I did that, it could both set an example to the Floor Guardians about paid leave, but it would also be an experiment to see how well Nazarick would fare without them.

He had noticed the problem of the increasing workload on the Floor Guardians long ago. Perhaps he could figure out a solution to that problem through this.

"Alright!"

After he completes a certain amount of work, he should take those children to the Elven nation to make some friends.

Ainz stood up and walked out of the room with that plan firmly set in his heart.

OVERLORD

Character Profiles



Renner Theiere Chardelon Ryle Vaiself

| Heteromorph

ラナー・ティエール・シャルドルン・ライル・ヴァイセルフ

The Golden Princess

Position —— ●● To be determined

Residence —— A room on the 9th Floor of the Great Underground Tomb of Nazarick

Racial Levels —— Imp —— lvl 1

Class Levels —— Actress (Common) —— lvl 4

Genius —— lvl 5

Birthday —— 7th day of the Upper Fire Month

Hobby —— Having ●●● with Climb

{ personal character }

Someone who trampled over the happiness of the vast majority of the Kingdom's people to better achieve her own dreams. She is the happiest woman in the world. She holds no ill will for the people of the Kingdom; rather, she feels a sort of gratitude towards them. That said, her sentiment is no different than one's appreciation of the existence of food. Genius is a special class wherein its levels are interchangeable with all basic and common classes. That said, it can only replace one class at a time (currently). Renner mostly used this class to substitute for Princess levels. It is important to note that Genius is an extremely rare class; in fact, it is possible to count the number of people who possess this class on two hands.

Zanac Valleon | Humanoid
Igana Ryle Vaiself

ザナック・ヴァルレオン・イガナ・ライル・ヴァイセルフ

The Last King of the Vaiself Royal Family



Position ——— Second Prince of the Vaiself Royal Family

Residence ——— Ro-Lente Castle

Class Levels — King (Common) ——— lvl 1
Prince (Common) ——— lvl 4
Charisma (Common) ——— lvl 2
Fighter ——— lvl 1

Birthday ——— 14th day of the Lower Water Month

Hobby ——— Eating, sleeping, and spacing out

{ personal character }

Because it had been decided before his birth that his elder brother would definitely inherit the throne, Zanac's position was not that great. Neither did the nobles support him nor was he close to anyone in the palace. Still, as one with exceeding abilities, he refused to yield and gave his all to the improvement of the Royal Family's future. Zanac, Renner, Marquis Raeven, and Gazef; if those four were united in mind and were truly motivated, they should have been able to push back the Empire's encroachment and bring about a stronger Kingdom. Perhaps this sounds improbable, but had Nazarick not shown up and had Barbro died before he could inherit the throne it could definitely have come true.



| Humanoid

Azuth Aindra

アズス・アインドラ

The Performing Adventurer

Position —— Leader of the Adamantite-ranked adventurer team Red Drop

Residence —— The Dragon's Breath Luxury Hotel in the capital city of the Argland Council State

Class Levels —— Fighter —— lvl ?

Sniper —— lvl ?

Athletic Master —— lvl ?

Others

Birthday —— 15th day of the Lower Water Month

Hobby —— Sampling high quality alcohol (but he can't hold his liquor)

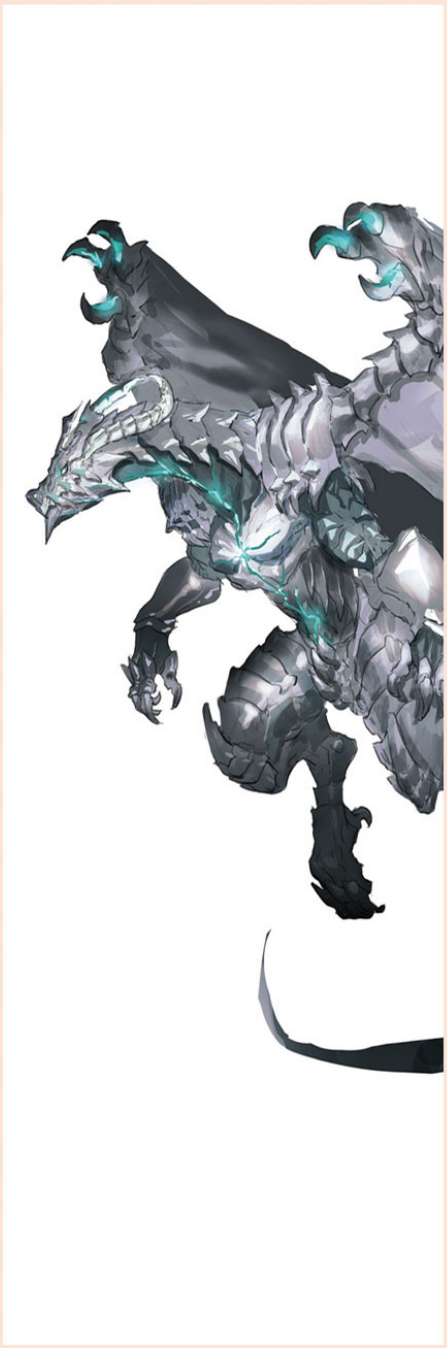
{ personal character }

If one were to address him by his full name, it would take quite a long time (because of his many knighthoods and noble titles), so this Character Sheet will only introduce him by his preferred name. His personal combat abilities are the lowest on his team and are also probably the lowest of any Adamantite-ranked adventurer. In addition, because many of his levels have been invested in classes that specialize in operating the Powered Suit, he would not be much use were he to fight without it. Although he heavily relies on the Powered Suit's capabilities, he is still strong enough independently to be considered an Orichalcum-ranked adventurer. In other words, he is by no means weak.

Tsaindorcus Vaision | Heteromorph

ツァインドルクス＝ヴァイシオン

Platinum Dragon Lord



Position ——— Unspecified as he has multiple

Residence ——— Unspecified as he has multiple

Class Levels ——— Primitive Caster ——— lvl ?

World Connector ——— lvl ?

Overed Dragon ——— lvl ?

Soul Adorer ——— lvl ?

Others

Birthday ——— Night of the Falling Star

Hobby ——— Keeping watch over the world

{ personal character }

The strongest class of Dragon Lord. He killed a Player in the past. Although he is of gentle disposition and has a magnanimous heart, Tsaindorcus will always prioritize the bigger picture. He possesses the steely resolve to sacrifice as many lives as are necessary. In the past, he cooperated with a certain coalition of Dragon Lords because their goals had happened to align, but now that this is no longer the case their relationship has deteriorated. He has established multiple bases across the world and has also run experiments regarding the process of nation-formation. The Council State itself was part of his larger experimentations. His power reaches its peak when he is in the East, in a land managed by a Dragon Lord confidant of his. If you wished to fight a decisive battle with Tsa, then the battlefield would have to be in the East.

OVERLORD

Character Profiles

The Forty-One Supreme Beings

Compilation

LUCI★FER

Heteromorph

るし★ふぁー

Angel Doll, Nazarick's Troublemaker



{ personal character }

Because his communication skills were lacking, he had a poor understanding of personal space. In front of people that he was not familiar with, he chose to remain silent. However, once he began to speak about topics he found interesting he became unable to stop. At times, he was stubborn to the extent of being incorrigible. With those who he believed he had a good relationship with, he would frequently push the envelope to see where their boundaries were. He would laugh while irritating others by committing deeds that he did not think they would mind, but they often did. While he did not act with malicious intent, the guild found this aspect of him to be a pain to deal with. It was to the point where even Momonga was bothered.

Afterword

Long time no see everyone, this is Kugane Maruyama. The following text contains a few spoilers, so consider this a warning for those of you who have not read the volume yet.

Let us begin then. I checked and saw that Volume 13 went on sale on the 27th of April 2018 and this volume should be on sale in March... It is not 2020 yet as I write this afterword, but since the book will be on sale March of 2020, around two years' worth of time will have passed since the last volume. With that in mind, I felt like I had to greet everyone with a "long time no see."

Can everybody feel the... effort I had put in over the course of nearly two years? You can't? You can't huh... sigh...

Putting Maruyama's efforts aside, two years is quite a long period of time. A lot must have happened for everybody during these two years, the same was true for me. We are in a new era too, from Heisei to Reiwa.

Personally, I have been busy with all kinds of work during this period, so it did not feel like a long time had passed since the last volume for me. If everybody felt like they have "waited for a long time" then on a certain level, it would bring me the greatest amount of joy.

Because that proves to me how much my readers were anticipating the next installment of Overlord.

So, let us talk about Volume 14. The Kingdom had been set up as a stage for the story multiple times since the first volume. Many of its characters have had their arcs come to an end here. Some of them lived, and others died. I believe their ends were predictable to most readers, but in the process of writing this volume, some characters did manage to avoid the tragic fate of death.

Yes, "those characters." While writing this volume, I repeated asked myself, "Would they die such moronic deaths?" which was why things ended up going the way they did. Initially I had planned for them to all die due to no fault of

their own.

How unfortunate.

Setting aside Maruyama's thoughts, if everybody thought "Those were good ends to their arcs," it would make Maruyama unbelievably happy. After all, to have sent them off the way I did, I have had to fill up quite a lot of pages.

Well then, we are in the endgame now.

To all my readers and to everyone who had supported Maruyama: Thank you!

Three more volumes to go. If everybody could continue to show your support, Maruyama would be overjoyed.

Kugane Maruyama

December 2019



It's still January as I write this postscript, so I guess it ended up as some sort of New Year's greeting...

Thank you all for your continued support for Overlord again this year!!

So-Bin

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The world is all *yours*.

